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Fantasy & Science Fiction

FEBRUARY

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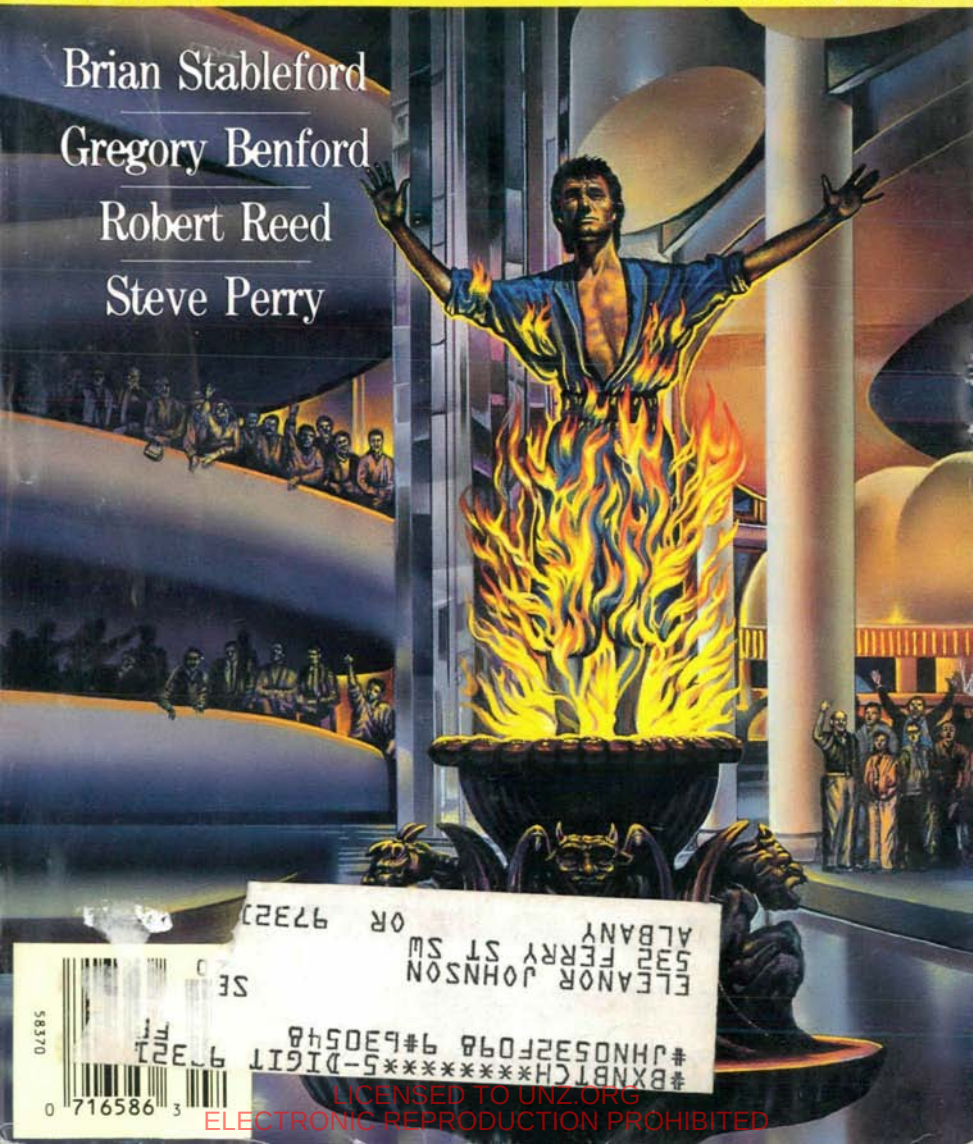

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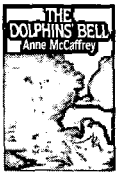

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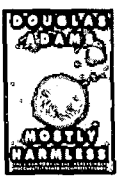

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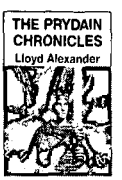

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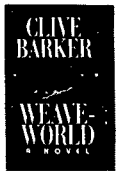
"Son, it's time. Witch do you want for joining now?"



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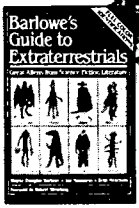

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THE MAGAZINE OF
Fantasy & Science Fiction

FEBRUARY • 45th Year of Publication

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

I HAVE JUST returned from the World Science Fiction Convention, held over Labor Day Weekend in San Francisco. (Magazine lead-times being what they are, you will read this in the February issue, although I am writing it at the end of September.) Worldcons are held every year, always on Labor Day, in various locations all over the world. Next year's convention will be in Canada. I heard that, at last count, about 7,000 people attended the San Francisco Worldcon —and in that group were many of the artists, writers, and screenwriters who produce much of the science fiction we read.

At this year's Worldcon, *F&SF* tried an experiment. We had a booth in the exhibit area where we sold t-shirts and subscriptions to the magazine. Many writers who have sold us stories held autograph sessions, and even more stopped by to say hello. We weren't sure what the response would be: at worst, we would spend five days sitting at the booth talking to no one, and at best, we would be mobbed.

We were mobbed.

Some vignettes: Christina F. York, who ran the booth (I stopped by as often as I could, which wasn't as often as I liked) and I finished setting up on Thursday morning, just before the exhibit area opened. Convention attendees had lined up outside in rows twenty deep. At noon, the convention organizers pulled the chain off the door, and the crowd rushed in. About thirty people immediately stopped at our booth, buying t-shirts, subscriptions and offering opinions about the magazine. A female reporter from a local radio station plowed her way through the crowd and shoved a microphone in Chris's face.

"What's the most bizarre story you've ever bought?" the reporter asked.

"She bought 'em," Chris said, indicating me, as she handed out t-shirts.

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The reporter asked me the same question. I looked at her, open-mouthed, trying to compute the change for $34 from a $50 bill as I thought about her question.

"You don't read the magazine, do you?" a middle-aged gentleman standing next to the reporter asked before I could say anything.

"Why, no," she said. "I came over because of the sign —"

"Well, if you read the magazine," he said. "You'd know that all the stories are interesting, all the stories are good, and all of science fiction is bizarre."

She left, we chuckled, and the booth was officially open. Most of the interactions were wonderful: from the gentleman in the booth next to us who took time each day to say how much he liked the magazine to the late night announcer from San Francisco's biggest a.m. station who stopped to say he had enjoyed the magazine since the mid-sixties. Writers signed magazines and visited with readers. Some writers even hawked t-shirts. Long-time readers made suggestions for improvements they'd like to see in the magazine, while first-time readers took a free Oct/Nov issue and returned to say how much they enjoyed it. The t-shirts (a reproduction of the Thomas Canty October/November cover) were a big hit.

But the point of this editorial is not to brag about how well the booth went. It is, instead, to say thank you to all the people who stopped, all the people who subscribed, and all the people who gave us their support. Since most of us connected with the magazine work in isolation (writers stay home to write; I edit from a house hidden in the Oregon Coastal Mountain range; Ed Ferman does his publishing business from a small town in Connecticut), we rarely see the people who are reading the magazine.

Let me say, because I may have been too busy attempting math while making change to say it then, that I appreciated meeting you, and I appreciated hearing from you. Thanks for dropping by. You made the experiment a success.

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Richard Bowes makes his third appearance in F&SF *with "The Shadow and the Gunman." All three of his stories, which stand alone, are about Kevin Grierson at various points of his life, and all three will appear in Richard's novel,* Minions of the Moon. *This story is the Shadow's origin tale.*

Another Kevin Grierson story appeared in Tomorrow Magazine. *Richard has also sold stories to Pulphouse Magazine, and the* Year's best Fantasy and Horror. *His three novels,* War Child, Feral Cell, *and* Goblin Market, *were published by Warner/Questar.*

The Shadow and The Gunman

By Richard Bowes

Part One

IN THE AUTUMN OF MY senior year of high school my Shadow spoke to me. The summer before that, John F. Kennedy was nominated for president and my mother died behind the wheel of her car.

Until then my Shadow had been vague, hard to pinpoint, a secret friend who slipped in sometimes to get me into trouble. My mother's Shadow, on the other hand, was clear and mean and often appeared when she drank. It wasn't just two sides of the same person. As a little kid, at least a few times, I saw Mother and Shadow together.

Her death hardly gave me pause. Since she had been drinking, I managed to tell myself it was the Shadow who had died. As always, my mother would show up sweetly apologizing for being late for the funeral.

Aged sixteen, I told no one any of this. The Code of Silence for the Boston Irish was simple. Certain things you didn't tell other people. Lots of things

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you didn't even tell yourself.

When he came to the wake, my stepfather had little to say. His divorce from my mother when I was ten was devastating. Not that Frank was all that great. Usually he ignored me. What I appreciated about him was that, like most people, he had no Shadow. While he was around we looked like a TV family.

All around me, aunts and cousins broke down. Gramny, my grandmother, aged visibly at the death of her youngest. Grand-Aunt Tay was badly shaken. I alone was dry-eyed.

On one occasion or another at the wake, each of my uncles, Bob the lawyer, Mike the cop, Jim who had the bar in Field's Corner, got lit and talked to me about Ellen, their little sister. She had been their father's favorite. I was the first and favorite grandchild. Terrible Tom Malloy, my grandfather, had founded the bar and the family fortune, such as it was. His sons had gone in fear of him.

Jim, the eldest, shook his head sadly. "They had hopes for you, Kevin. School and all. When you have time to recover, you have to think about your future."

My plans included college but otherwise were vague. I thought sometimes about a .38 that rested in the upstairs hall closet.

The day of the funeral Aunt Tay hugged me. I don't think anyone else has ever been called that. Teresa was her given name, like the saint, and she was very proud of it. But when, as first grandchild, I called her Aunt Tay, it stuck. Even Gramny, her sister, began calling her Tay.

This thin, white-haired lady with great blue eyes looked at me and said:

BY FELL NIGHT

When I was small and down or scared, we had recited this verse. Tay Fallon was a storyteller, a poet. I tried to slip by her, saying, "Come on, Tay, I'm fine."

BY FELL NIGHT

She repeated and stood in my way. With a bored sigh, I gave the response:

WITH STICK AND BONE

"Dilleachdan," she said in Gaelic, which I didn't understand. "It's hard for those of us with the gift." It wouldn't surprise me if she knew I was thinking about the revolver upstairs. Tay had been born with a caul and claimed a kind of second sight.

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She insisted that I too had a gift, though what it was she never said. All I knew for sure was that I lived under a teenage curse: I was too smart to be a tough kid and too screwy to be a smart kid. The high school drama society was where I hid out.

Maybe the ability to see and to believe two completely different things is the very base of second sight. My mother had always said she wanted her effects to be given away to charity. That fall her sisters-in-law turned what had been her bedroom into a faceless guest room. Still, I managed to believe in one corner of my mind that she was alive.

In an Irish household of my grandmother's generation, the eldest male, whatever his age, was Himself. His wishes might not all be law, but his every failing would surely be ignored as long as possible. My grandfather had died before I could remember, so when my mother moved in with Gramny and Aunt Tay, I became Himself.

That fall, I strained against the ropes and found there were none. My all-boys public school downtown made everyone wear coat and tie. But away from there, I started dressing like a street punk and growing my hair like JFK's. I carried cigarettes and even smoked a few. I snuck sips of whiskey at home and found winos willing to buy me half pints. At the Y where I had learned to swim a couple of years before, no one noticed when I started showing up again.

My grandmother's house, a gray Queen Anne on the hills of Dorchester, was a minefield of memorabilia. But my favorite was the .38 hidden in the upstairs hall closet. Oiled and cleaned and wrapped in a piece of chamois, it was something I wasn't supposed to know about.

At first all I did was take it to my room and spin the cylinder. A box of ammo was wrapped with the revolver, but at that time, I never loaded it. Once, I put the barrel to the side of my head and pulled the trigger. When I did, I felt that someone was with me. But when I looked, I was alone. That time, I was careless about putting the revolver back.

Tay noticed. Had I been a few years younger, she might have whipped up some dark and special tea to snap me out of it. Instead, feeling in need of help, she leaked word discreetly to her nephew Bob, the lawyer. Bob's wife, Aunt Alice, had a friend who recommended a shrink. Money was found to send me to him twice a week.

Tuesdays after school and early on Saturdays, I went over to Kenmore

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Square and talked to Dr. Charles Petrie, a fat middle-aged guy with nubby sweaters. Tuesdays, in blazer and loafers, I told him about my school problems.

"The Drama Society, remember, sir, I told you they're doing Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth, Part One.* I told Mr. Royce, the faculty advisor, I wanted to be Hotspur, a great part, this rebel who stutters when he gets excited." Petrie nodded like he knew the play. "Yesterday, I found out I'm Poins, who's this minor accomplice. And he's not even in the last part."

A pause followed until it occurred to Petrie that I had stopped talking. "What," another pause, "was your reaction to this?"

"I got real pissed."

"Yes?" He wrote that down. "Go on."

His office was part of a suite with a dozen other analysts. Tuesdays, there was a receptionist and the place was full of patients: unhappy fat ladies, tense guys clutching briefcases. The entire building was busy.

Saturdays, the building was quiet and the office empty when I'd come in wearing black chinos and a warm-up jacket. Petrie and I never talked about my mother or the gun or what it was I did after leaving the office.

One Saturday I told him, "I'm in this long hallway, a sort of gallery with this soft kind of light and these middle-aged guys standing there. One of them looks at me, and says, 'You're twins.'"

The phrase "middle-aged guys" seemed to interest the doctor. He nodded and wrote that down. "Do you remember any more of your dreams?" he asked.

I almost never remembered dreams. The week before, a guy called Joe had actually said that. Looking where he did, I glimpsed a horribly familiar kid giving the special hard smile I sometimes practiced in mirrors. Then the kid was gone and Joe shook his head, saying, "Just seeing double."

While I wondered how to explain that, Petrie said, "Time's up, Kevin. See you Tuesday at three."

Emerging from his office I found the waiting room no longer empty. A patient with long strawberry blonde hair sat on a couch leafing through a *New Yorker.*

She wore slacks and ankle-high riding boots. One of them rested on the low table in front of her in a way that was absolutely cool. With the dead accuracy of a kid, I realized she was a crucial few years my senior. I also knew

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that skin and bones like hers were expensive.

When she looked up, it was right into my wide eyes. From my limited experience of lovely girls, I was prepared for her to realize our differences in age and sophistication, frown and go back to her magazine. Instead, she nodded like she understood what she saw. That was a feeling I never got from Petrie. Smiling, she asked, "Is your shrink giving you anything good?"

Not sure what she meant, I shook my head. She nodded toward one of the offices. "I'm seeing Kleinman, a dullard but occasionally useful. My name is Stacey Hale." Stacey held out her hand.

"Kevin Grierson," I said and took it. She left something in my palm. "Next time, have him give you those." I looked down at a green, heart-shaped pill. "Dexedrine," she said. "You're here on Saturdays?" Dr. Kleinman's door opened as I nodded.

Out in the hall, I still saw her face. The pill was a little bitter when I washed it down at a water fountain. At first, I felt nothing. But by the time I reached the Y, I was sailing. Far away kids shouted in the pool; in the gray lighted Gallery middle-aged men whispered.

Some guy I didn't know said, "Ten dollars to pose," and led me into an alcove. "Open your clothes. Let them slip down. Yes! Jacket and shirt off your shoulders, hands behind you like you're cuffed. Look tough." I gave my practiced hard smile. "Freeze!" He was creepy but he didn't touch me. Besides, all this felt like it was happening to someone else.

That afternoon, I bought a milk shake at a luncheonette and couldn't finish it. Inside my head, something crackled like the blue sparks on streetcar wires. Gray and dowdy streets slid by around me until I found myself standing at a fence watching an engine shuttle cars in the Boston and Maine yards. In the distance, slanting October sun hit the John Hancock tower and I thought about Stacey.

Tuesday in blazer and slacks, I looked at Dr. Petrie and said, "You know, sir, there's this kid in school who was having trouble like I'm having. His doctor gave him a certain prescription and it seemed to help."

The drug never again worked like that first time. But by Friday when we read through *Henry the Fourth*, I already knew all my lines and most of everyone else's.

Saturday morning, tingling from speed and anticipation, I came out of Petrie's office and found the waiting room empty. Stacey's doctor didn't even

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seem to be there. I was stunned. Outside at the curb sat a red MG with its motor running. Only when the horn blew did I focus. "Hey!" I said.

Stacey smiled. "Can I ask a big favor?" Anything! She must have seen that. "This is a no-parking area. Could you find a place for it? Oh, do you drive?"

I shook my head, ashamed to let her down. She turned off the motor. "Then can I ask you an even bigger favor?" Any plan imaginable could be canceled. "Wait here and if the cops come by, turn on the motor and pretend you're going to pull out." She tossed me the keys and went into the building, saying, "I'll buy you lunch. It will be a chance to talk."

Conscious of the immense trust, I sat vigilant in that front seat. Once or twice, I turned on the ignition and ran the motor, looking front and rear for the police car that never showed.

Later that day, in some town like Needham, we stopped at a drive-in and sat in the car nibbling hamburgers. Neither of us had much appetite. We giggled about that, then each took out a green pill and washed it down with the last of our Cokes. "How did you end up seeing Dr. Petrie?"

Wanting to make an impression, I told her, "Playing with guns. That made them think I'm suicidal."

She looked at me, nodded and said, "Yes, they would."

That afternoon we drove out into the country. The leaves were changing. We parked on a road overlooking a gold and red valley and she told me, "I have to see a shrink to fulfill a probation requirement. There was a little party at school, kind of an orgy actually, and I ran amok. You know how it is." Only able to dimly imagine, I nodded.

"Kleinman at least understands it's all a game. He gives me prescriptions, collects his fees and doesn't interfere." She laughed. "The only trouble I have with speed is that once in a while, out of the corner of my eyes, I see this snake dart."

Emboldened, I told her, "Sometimes, just for a second, I see this Shadow beside me. He has my face."

She stopped laughing. "There's someone you might want to talk to. He's called Dr. X. I'll mention you to him." She started the car. "It's getting late. Where do you live?"

In Dorchester, neighborhoods went by the names of Catholic parishes. Mine was Mary, Queen of Heaven. "Queena Heaven. You can drop me at any

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MTA station."

"And miss seeing a place called Queena Heaven? Just give me directions." It was dusk as we arrived. Stacey glanced at Snyder's Market and the Stop and Shop, the bars, the Shamut Bank and the elevated station. We drove up the steep hill past the brick gothic church.

The street I lived on ended with a cement wall. Beyond that, row after row of wooden three deckers marched down to the Boston harbor and ten thousand diapers flew like banners from their back porches.

Seeing my grandmother's house with Stacey was like seeing it for the first time; I noticed how gray and spooky it looked in the dying light. "Hey," I said, "it's haunted but what the hell."

She leaned over and ruffled my hair. Sunday morning, I could still feel the touch of her hand. Her interest in me was a mystery I didn't want to unravel.

Next Saturday, I watched her car again. Afterward, Stacey found a deserted stretch of road and gave me my first driving lesson. Several times our hands touched and a jolt went through me. When she dropped me off at home, I said, "Dr. Petrie isn't doing me much good. What about this guy Dr. X?"

Stacey kissed me on the mouth and said, "We'll see." She must have known that she owned my soul.

Inside, my grandmother, a flurry of flour and white hair, was busy in the kitchen. "Jimmy, my love," she said, mistaking me for her son the bar owner, "run down to Snyder's for some baking powder before he closes."

The following Saturday, very tense, Stacey asked, "Do you have any pills?" Feeling I'd failed her, I shook my head. It was cold sitting in that little car. When Stacey came out she had been crying.

She sat for a moment before saying, "I've got a scrip. But I'm broke." Desperately, I searched my pockets and came up with sixty cents. "This is bad, Kevin. I need something or I am going to flip out." My heart leaped at this opportunity. I had her drive me to the Y.

Saturdays, they gave kids swimming lessons. We swam bare ass and got yelled at by counselors in trunks. But some of us found out that instead we could walk past the locker room into this long gallery where kids got treated with great respect.

There, frosted windows set in deep alcoves let in a pearly light and older

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guys always stood around the door. When I came in, one of them whispered, "Fred." Everyone always whispered like it was church. Fred was the name I used. This was the guy who said he was Joe and once thought that I was twins.

Joe was safe and generous. He made a little gesture indicating both of us and we stepped into one of the alcoves. Deftly he positioned me on a window ledge and showed me his bald spot. My eyes went out of focus. Far away, someone whistled the theme from *The High and the Mighty*. Joe stuck the money in my pants and murmured, "You're a good kid, Fred. Where do you live?"

"Ina projects," I told him and waved good-bye.

When I proudly handed her the money, Stacey regarded me curiously. Innocent in a strange kind of way, I couldn't imagine why. A few minutes later she came out of a drug store already looking much better and said, "You are definitely ready for Dr. X. You can learn a lot. But watch out for him. And remember you come there as my friend."

That struck me as odd. "Is he a psychiatrist?"

"No. He hasn't let that happen to him." She took Beacon Street out of town.

I remember asking, "His name is Dr. X?" as she turned off Beacon and down a curving suburban road. Ponds lay behind stands of trees. Victorian mansions spread over the tops of hillocks.

"He needs to protect his identity. There are a lot of things society just doesn't understand."

Without slowing, she drove through a set of open iron gates, went up a curving driveway and parked under a portico. "He has a nice house," I said.

"Actually, this is my mother's place. He practices here while she's away." Before getting out of the car, Stacey slipped some of the pills from the bottle into her pocket.

She called, "Hello?" when she opened the front door. The place was quiet, dark with the curtains mostly drawn. On the hall table was a used Kleenex and a coffee cup filled with half-drowned cigarettes. In a corner lay an empty glass. Wine had dried into the rug.

To our left was a book-lined room that I identified as the library. A figure in a black suit stirred on a couch, a small man with a round face and a fringe of gray hair. "A new communicant?" he asked in the voice of a testy troll. For

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a bad moment I thought that this was Dr. X.

"Hello, Max," said Stacey. "Max was once an Episcopal priest," she explained as she led me through a big kitchen. It stank of garbage and dirty dishes. On the table lay an open dictionary with pages hollowed out to create a pocket. On a sideboard a silver bowl had been polished till it shone in the gloom. Upstairs, someone put on a record, jazz piano.

Lonely notes echoed through the halls. Stacey opened a door and motioned me down a flight of stairs. At the bottom was a low, windowless room. Walls, ceiling, floor were all painted a dead white. Bright lighting was set in the ceiling. The only furnishings were a white table and two chairs.

At the table facing the door was a guy, older, maybe thirty. A black beard made it hard to tell. "Dr. X," said Stacey, "this is Kevin." He was big and looked like he had once been fat. He wore a blue Oxford knit shirt outside his pants.

"Hi, Kevin." Dr. X rose to shake my hand. "Stacey's talked about you."

"And look what he bought us." She held up the vial.

"Oh boy, vitamins! Thanks, Kevin!" Grabbing with the impulsiveness of a kid, he washed down a couple of the pills with the contents of a huge pewter stein that he picked up from the floor beside him. "Stacey said you were acting. What play?"

Self-consciousness seized me. "*Henry the Fourth.* It's pretty stupid. Just school."

"It's a great play!" He put the vial in his pocket. "It's about the demimonde." He waved his arm to indicate the house, the three of us. "About the street and rich people slumming. Wonderful lines! Falstaff says, 'Let us be Diana's foresters, gentlemen of the shade, minions of the moon.'"

"I just have a small part. Poins, he's a. . . ."

"Poins!" Dr. X slapped his hands together. "Terrific! Poins is the knife, the street trickster. Even Falstaff is wary of him. Poins is some kind of disinherited son. He and Prince Hal are very young. Boys are natural street people, powerless, disposable. Poins disappears from the play because that happens to people like him."

Dr. X in his exuberance walked over to Stacey, put his hands on her breasts, and kissed her. He looked at my sudden jealousy and smiled. She excused herself and went back upstairs. It occurred to me that Dr. X may have known what play I was in and read up. If so, that was more trouble than Petrie

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had ever taken.

I sat in one chair with Dr. X opposite me and we listened to distant music. "Thelonius in San Francisco," he explained, taking out the vial and offering me a pill. He handed me his stein and I washed it down with warm beer.

Soon, my attention to detail became more intense. The only thing on the table was a blank prescription pad. I noticed the name Blumstein at the top. In a far corner of the floor was a bolt lock. It took me a moment to see the outline of a trap door. The music from upstairs changed at one point. Dr. X's mouth moved like he was tasting the notes. "Gould, playing Bach's Goldberg Variations," he said.

That first Saturday, we talked for hours. Some of the insights which bowled me over are true of any unhappy sixteen-year-old. "Half the time you feel like an alien in this land. In this world."

Other things he saw were phenomenally accurate. "You have, let's see, three uncles," he said, staring into my eyes with his intense pinned ones. "The youngest one's a pries... no, a lawyer. The middle one's a cop, of course. And the oldest one does what? Runs a bar."

Never had I discussed my mother's family with Stacey. He smiled at my surprise and said, "What makes this an Irish joke is that the bartender has all the money."

At that moment someone knocked on the door upstairs. Dr. X rose, shook my hand, and said, "See you next Saturday?" as if he looked forward to it. I nodded eagerly.

A fox-faced man with red hair, the next patient, brushed past me on the cellar steps. Stacey was not to be found on the first floor and I was shy about going upstairs. Max still lay on the library couch. "Go in peace," he said as I left.

Outside was a cold drizzle. That didn't bother me. My pulses skipped. Lights were on in other houses. But Stacey's, when I looked back from the end of the driveway, was dark. Then I saw her at an upstairs window. My heart bounded with speed and passion. She saw me. Or rather she saw the one who for a moment stood beside me. Because he blew her a kiss and she returned it.

Too excited to let that worry me, with a Bostonian's sixth sense, I headed for the nearest streetcar stop.

In the play, Falstaff says about Poins, "If men were saved by merit what

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hole in hell were hot enough for him." Monday at rehearsal, remembering all Dr. X had told me, I bounced on my toes and talked like Fred who lived ina projects.

"Easy does it, Grierson," said Mr. Royce, the faculty advisor. "This is Shakespeare, not the Untouchables."

Over the next couple of weeks, I saw Dr. X regularly. Like amphetamine, he was never as good as that first time. When there were pills on the table he'd give me an upper or a downer. If there weren't, he borrowed some of mine.

I came to understand that there were ways in which he was a fool. Sometimes he said stuff like, "I'm a quarter Irish, a quarter French, a quarter English with a bit of German and smattering of Jew. Blood boils in me." He called speed vitamins and claimed it enabled him to read other peoples' minds.

Despite that, he had his moments. "Who is the third who always walks beside you?" he once asked. "When I count there's just you and me. But when I look there is always another walking beside you." Later I realized he was paraphrasing T.S. Eliot. But right then, the words hit home.

He followed it up. "Everybody's got another self, Kevin. Most people, the dull, the mundane, never show it. But some get to let that dog run."

Every Saturday, I drove with Stacey out to her house. I thought about her constantly. Everything else, school, family, Dr. Petrie, even the Gallery, was backdrop to those rides. Yet, each week she seemed a little more distant. We talked, but any mention by me of Dr. X and she became silent.

Max was always present and there were others: college guys in tweed jackets clustered around a lady who smoked a pipe, a man in a turtleneck who played guitar, girls wearing leotards, a very light-skinned negro man with a much older white woman.

One week when we came in, Max sat in the library with a plump pale girl close to my age. Stacey grimaced and muttered, "Slug," under her breath.

Max introduced her. "Lisa. An acolyte, undergoing the process of finishing herself." He added, "We have an oubliette, you know," as if he couldn't imagine my not wondering about that.

Everyone, but especially Dr. X, needed more and more drugs to function. When I went downstairs after meeting Lisa, he waved a prescription at me. "Kevin, there's a druggist in Coolidge Corner. A careless guy. I want you to go over there and break this. No one would suspect your choir boy face."

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It struck me as a bad idea. I shook my head and Dr. X told me, "You refuse because your mundane persona still holds sway. There's a little treatment I recommend. Isolation. Once you're alone, the stronger part of your personality can take over."

Suddenly understanding, I looked toward the trap door and repeated the unfamiliar word, "Oubliette."

Dr. X smiled like I was a prize pupil. "From the French oublier, to forget. Don't worry about our doing that. You won't be in there long. Maybe a couple of days over the Thanksgiving weekend." At the time, nothing more was said.

The Saturday before Thanksgiving, Stacey and I found Max and everybody else downstairs in Dr. X's office. "Just in time to witness a graduation ceremony, Kevin," said the doctor, unlatching the door to the oubliette.

He opened it to reveal a wooden ladder leading down to pitch dark. From below a tiny voice cried, "It's cold down here. I've come to terms with myself."

Dr. X descended. Max waited at the top of the ladder. He extended his hand to Lisa. Her eyes were empty. All she wore was one of Dr. X's big Oxford weave shirts. "Lisa was bold enough to want to confront herself," said Dr. X, glancing at me. Max and the others smirked.

When Stacey and I went back upstairs, she looked at me, really looked at me, for the first time in weeks and said, "Kevin, this is no place for you. I thought you could handle Dr. X. But my judgment was off, maybe my timing. You're almost ready, but you're still a kid. He sees your potential too. Get out of here before he hurts you."

She kissed me on the mouth and said, "When I need someone, I'll call and you'll be ready." On my way home, I managed to forget the warning and the brush-off and remembered only the kiss.

The first thing I did when I got in the door was to turn off the fire under a pot in the kitchen. Tay still worked as secretary to professors over in Cambridge. That day she was helping one of them sort his papers.

My grandmother was present but not totally accounted for. She sat in the living room in the midst of boxes of photos and papers. With a bright smile she said, "Here's one of you, Jamey." From a faded photo taken before the turn of the century, a baby stared wide-eyed in the midst of a vast christening gown.

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"Nah, this is me, Gramny." I was in a snapshot of my mother, my grandfather, and myself on the front steps of the house. My mother stood looking up proudly at Terrible Tom Malloy, saloon owner, ward heeler, legendary terror. He looked like a meaner, smarter version of his sons.

He stared right at the camera with clever, cold eyes. One arm he had around my mother. I was a blurry bundle in the other. I remembered when I was about ten my mother telling me about her father. "Your uncles are still afraid of Daddy. If the old man came back and told them to, they'd all line up to get hit."

We sped off from a family gathering like it was a getaway. She had suddenly pulled me away from my cousins and loaded me in the car as her brothers stood looking stunned. "When I want, I make them afraid of me too." She laughed. "I just did it now." The laugh scared me more than the driving. It meant that my mother was drunk and her Shadow was at the wheel.

The next picture I found was a familiar one of my parents' wedding. It was wartime. In the background girls with flowers, guys in uniforms smiled at the couple walking arm in arm. In a spring dress and wide hat my mother, beautiful as some half-remembered forties movie star, leaned on my father's shoulder and smiled at the camera.

My father in his navy blues stared bewildered and adoring only at her. He came from New Jersey, met and married my mother while waiting to go overseas. With hundreds of others, he died when the cruiser LaSalle went down in the South Pacific. He had almost no family. Once I had imagined I was secretly the son of a hero, the Lone Ranger, maybe, or Ted Williams. Now I saw too much of myself in him to fantasize.

"Poor lamb," said my grandmother, looking at my father. "He hadn't a piece of meanness in him." She put out her hand and I helped her upstairs for a rest.

Back on the couch, I found photos of my mother from childhood up to the time of her second marriage. For a long while there was nothing. As she got older she hated to have her picture taken.

Then at the bottom of the box was one I had never seen. A few years before, Aunt Alice had taken candid photos with her new flash camera. Alice was no artist, the pictures were unfocused, feet and heads were cut off, radiators were centers of attention.

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But in one, she had caught my mother walking into a room with a glass in her hand. At first, the photo appeared to be a double exposure. Two mothers looked up. But instead of being identical, one wore a tired smile. The other, partly eclipsing the first, looked angry at being caught.

That night after the TV stations left the air, I sat sleepless at the kitchen table staring at papers. Some documents had my name on them. Every time there was a creak or bump in the house, I half expected the front door to open and my mother to come in. Once I looked up to find Tay watching me.

"Ah, Kevin, you're so wise and owl-eyed lately. And you haven't been eating. There's ham and eggs in the ice box."

"I'm not hungry."

"Cocoa then. You always liked me to make cocoa." Tay moved to the sink to fill the kettle. She looked over my shoulder at a picture of my mother at her junior prom. "She was her father's favorite." I nodded, interested.

Then she said, "Remember the story I told when you were small. How once there was a king with three sons who did not suit him and a daughter who suited him very well indeed? And as it happened. . . ."

Impatient at what I saw as bedtime stories, I said, "And she gets cheated and gets turned into a magic hawk or something. I remember but I'm a little old for that. There's stuff about me, Tay. . . I need to figure things out."

She waited, but words could take me no further. After a long pause, she reached out and patted my hair. "Faileas," she said.

It didn't occur to me that she recognized my trouble and was also struggling to put words to it. Sullen, I turned away from her. That Monday, I took the double photo of my mother and the papers with my name on them to school and stuck them in my locker, intending to study them later.

That year, family Thanksgiving was at Uncle Jim's house in Milton. Crying, "God bless us," Gramny and Tay were lost in the flurry of little cousins as soon as we came in the door.

Thanks to the speed, I ate almost no dinner. But I drank quite a bit. Afterwards, kids laughed and screamed, women washed the dishes and my uncles leaned on the furniture with their glasses. As the oldest nephew, I was allowed in their presence.

They were talking about Kennedy. "Sure, a great day for the Irish," said Bob with a phony brogue.

"The black Irish," said Mike.

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"That's niggers to you," Jim said and they looked my way, noticed my distaste.

Uncle Bob poured me a beer. "From what I see, you're not much interested in school. College has gotten really expensive. Maybe you should think of the navy. Three years, see the world."

"My boards and SATs are fine. I'll probably go to BU."

Jim said, "Bob went to college and law school and is broke. Mike graduated from high school and has finally got his head above water. Me, I got an eighth grade education and I'm the one everyone comes to for dough. The thing is, now there is no dough." We were sitting in his twelve room house. Neither of his brothers seemed to be hurting.

"Granddad put aside money. My mother. . . ."

"Your mother raised an aristocrat," said Bob, sounding aggrieved. "Boot camp would be a change for you."

"Kevin never listens to anyone. Maybe he's in love," said Mike, giving me the dead-eyed glance cops reserve for outsiders. "You got a girl friend, Kev?"

How to explain about Stacey and myself? I just shrugged. But I started thinking of her. Then Jim remarked, "Dad used to say when he took off his belt, 'Whip a young dog who's too big for his pants and puppy drawers fit him fine.'" They laughed but in their eyes, I saw no joking.

When I was small, they had sometimes intimidated me. Even at sixteen, I was skinny and my uncles were all big. But I remembered what my mother had said about them and their old man. Full of pills and booze, I just stared the way my grandfather did in the picture. For that moment, I was not alone. They choked like they had glimpsed my Shadow.

It was late when I saw Tay and my grandmother home. All my thoughts ran to Stacey and I slipped away. Connections were slow. It was after one when I looked up at dim lights flickering in her second floor windows. I had to knock for some time before Max appeared. His pupils small as BBs, he waved me in like I was expected.

"Stacey?" I wanted to know. He ignored the question.

Lisa sat in the kitchen with a trace of drool beside her mouth, sorting pills. "Once my inhibitions got broken down, Dr. X was able to show me that I'm the woman of situations. Yesterday, for instance, the situation was that everyone needs to get sleep. So I cashed prescriptions for these." She handed

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me a pill shaped like a torpedo.

Thelonius played upstairs. "Isolation and realization," said Max and poured Johnny Walker. "Drink up." I marveled at how little effect any of this had on me and my Shadow.

A time later, I found myself up on the second floor knocking on a locked door. After a while, the music and voices inside stopped. In the silence, I called "Stacey!" The door swung wide and Dr. X stood in an open bathrobe. He was semi-hard. Behind him, a slab of moonlight, maybe streetlight, fell on a slim figure on a wide bed. "Stacey?" I stepped into the room.

"Don't let him see me," she said. Immediately, Dr. X turned on a lamp. Stacey was covered by a sheet. Her hands were tied before her with the bathrobe cord. Instead of getting mad at Dr. X, she said to me, "What the hell are you doing here? Did I invite you?"

Dr. X laughed. "Look at how angry this makes him. Wait downstairs, Kevin. There's something we have to do." I knew what he intended. But I obeyed.

My heart should have been crushed. I should have been staggering and falling down. Instead, remote and cold and wide awake, I moved with great purpose. Down in the kitchen, Max gave me another pill. I yawned and pretended to lose my balance when he led me to the white room. I slid down the wall and lay on the floor with my coat as a pillow.

Max watched me and then went back upstairs. I slept open-eyed the way sharks do. Everything was red and grainy and I could see myself lying on the floor. "You're in the Eye of Storm," a voice whispered in my ear.

It was a while before Dr. X appeared. He held me up while Max emptied my pockets. I watched them guide me toward the open trap door with my head lolling, empty pockets hanging out like dogs' ears.

As Dr. X opened the trap door, I made it as easy as possible for Max to hold me upright. When they brought Lisa out of the oubliette, Dr. X had gone down to help her. As I watched from above, he descended again.

That's when my Shadow and I made our move. Max, stunned, looked from the zombie he held upright to the figure who grabbed him. Dr. X, wide-eyed, breathed, "Doppelgänger!"

Then I swung Max over the trap door. I planted a shoe on his skinny ass and shoved him down on top of Dr. X. I slammed the trap door and locked it shut. On the table were my keys, wallet, and cigarettes. There was also a

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prescription pad. Everything went in my pockets.

From the oubliette, Dr. X said calmly, "I thought you were more mature than this, Kevin. Just undo the latch and we can talk." Upstairs on the kitchen table were many pills which I scooped up. Only then did the booze and drugs start to hit me. My stomach lurched, blood banged in my head.

Upstairs, Stacey cried out like she was still tied up. I waited but she didn't say my name. I needed fresh air. "Don't forget to call me!" I yelled and headed for the front door. She started to wail.

In the library, the situation was that Lisa snored with her mouth open. "Don't do the thing that will get you killed, little boy," Dr. X yelled while pounding the trap door. "I see death around you. Cold nights and bad days, Kevin!"

In the first light, water trickled in gutters. The air smelled of wet dead leaves. A voice beside my ear said, "We got plenty of vitamins." I didn't turn to look. The face of your Shadow is always closer to your fears than your hopes.

Part Two

Back home, I got to my room without encountering Tay or Gramny. A red torpedo from the cache put me out. Late in the day, I looked at the foot of the bed and saw a guy with a banged up face and hair that looked like the army had gotten him.

It took me a moment to recognize my Shadow. He smiled like that hurt him and spun the cylinder of the revolver. "This is one sport you'd be good at," he said as he aimed at his temple. "Mom liked to play roulette too. Only, she did it with a car."

He pulled the trigger. I jumped as the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. "People kill themselves when they don't have the nerve to kill someone else. Like Mom with her brothers. She could get mad and scare them. But not always. I know they screwed her out of money. Instead of getting mad at them, she killed herself.

"Don't make that same mistake. You don't have to kill. All you have to do is show Uncle Jim that you aren't afraid. Take the gun and visit him today. I'll be there. We'll talk about our future. And his. Do it or you'll end

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up looking like this."

There was more but all of it scared me and I woke up dry-mouthed, soaked in sweat. More drugs kept me awake and distracted. Till dawn, my thought were all fantasies about Stacey and me. Somehow I was older, more dangerous, and driving a black Thunderbird. She got very excited each time I saved her from Dr. X.

That morning, nerves pulsing in my skin, I went to Petrie's office on the chance I'd meet Stacey. It turned out to be the last time I saw him. At one point, I tried to ask what the word Doppelgänger meant. But he looked up at me squirming in my seat and said, "You seem to be having side effects. I'm canceling your prescription."

Afterwards, as I should have known, there was no sign of Stacey. Things started to jump like on a bad TV and I saw a red MG out of the corner of my eye. When I turned, it was gone. Not wanting to be alone, I headed for the Gallery.

Joe might be there. He had once seen my Shadow. That Saturday, the place was busy. Lots of guys stood at the door. Kids had come from the pool wearing towels. I spotted Joe talking to one. He looked my way, amazed, like he saw double again. But he made the gesture indicating him and me.

As I stepped forward, Max appeared on my left. He had a bad gleam in his eyes. His hand was in his pocket. At my right hand was Dr. X, who lisped, "Say, we have a prior date!"

"Joe!" My shout got the Gallery's attention. Guys peered out of alcoves. Dr. X got his hand over my mouth. Max snapped something and stuck it up to my nose. It smelled like sweaty socks.

"Amyl nitrite," I heard Joe say as my head spun. Guys started zipping their flies; boys edged away. "You're hijacking the kid!"

"I'm a licensed psychiatrist," Dr. X told him. "This is an escaped patient." Their voices sounded like I was under water. Then the hands were gone from my face.

People started to run. A fleeing kid opened a fire door. An alarm began ringing. Someone yelled, "Raid!" Fresh air rushed in and my head cleared. Max was on the floor with a bloody lip.

I saw that Joe had slammed Dr. X against a wall. "Get out!" he yelled. Like a rabbit, I bolted down the fire escape.

For a while I just put distance between that place and myself. Finally,

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pain stabbed my side and I lay behind an empty loading dock in an alley. My heart would not stop pounding. My nose bled. I passed out wondering what had happened to Joe, who had fought for me. My Shadow said, "None of this would have happened if we'd gone to visit Uncle Jim."

Later I was awake and dry-heaving through the fence around the train yard. A cop car raced by and I tried to shrink into the sidewalk. My Shadow said, "Stacey told Dr. X where you'd be." All I wanted was to die.

Then I stood beneath an el with a steam whistle screaming inside my ears. A hand was in my pocket. Said my Shadow, "Take a red. Steady your head." I tried to swallow dry-mouthed and choked on the pill. If Dr. X didn't kill me, I thought, my Shadow would.

From a bridge, I tossed every pill and prescription onto a busy expressway. To exorcise my double, I chanted over and over, "Stay away from me. Stay away from me."

Blood pounded like something was busting out of my brain. He whispered in my ear, "You'll miss me while I'm gone." Later, huddled aching on a park bench, I spotted a flash of red. When I turned, there was no MG. My Shadow was gone and I felt empty.

On the roaring subway home I frantically searched the faces visible amid bags and boxes from Filene's and Jordan's, from Raymond's and R.H. White's. A woman on the first burst of Christmas shopping formed the word "Disgusting" as she and her friend stared at me.

At Queena Heaven it was cold and dark. My head spun as I tried to be sure everyone else off the train left the station ahead of me. Across the avenue, bodies glided, street light gleamed off the ice at Curtis Park. They had flooded the playground for the first skating of the year.

Crossing the street, I sat not far from a small fire on the shore. People warmed their hands. Little kids whose parents had forgotten about them slid by on their shoes. One old couple skated arm in arm. At the center of the ice, guys played freeform hockey.

It was important to pull myself together. I promised God a lifetime of monastic devotion if he would just make my head stay still. After a bit, my breathing slowed, the ringing in my ears died down, my brain slipped a cog or two.

Before me, goalies crouched in front of improvised nets. Pucks hissed, jumped on ice bumps. Bodies collided. A kid who had been my best friend

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in sixth grade skidded twenty feet on his back.

We barely nodded now. But seeing him evoked hot afternoons crouching shirtless waiting for grounders at third. More than memory, it was a dream which smeared time and circumstance. I was eleven years old when I rose from the bench. Walking up the hill I was going home to my parents.

Not my stepfather, my real father. He and my mother and I lived in my grandmother's house. Just the three of us. I knew they would be standing outside in summer sunlight, she in her picture hat, he in his navy uniform. I would tell them about my Shadow. They would explain that it was a nightmare and I would rest easy in their arms.

Not even the sight of that house in darkness stopped my dream. Lights were on in the living room. From the front hall I saw my grandmother sitting on the couch with all the lamps lit and the family photos spread out before her. She had made tea. Laid out three cups. "Here he is after all!" she exclaimed, like she and my parents had been worried.

I stepped into the room. "Kevin," she said. "Dr. Exelman has been waiting for you."

"Hi, Kevin," said Dr. X, as he moved between me and the door. "Did you forget about the overnight seminar?" He wore horn-rimmed glasses I had never seen before. They helped mask the swelling of one of his eyes. His smile was vitamin enriched.

A battered suitcase from the upstairs closet stood next to the couch. "Dr. Exelman helped me pack a change of clothes and your tooth brush so you'd be ready as soon as you came home," My grandmother smiled brightly as I stood paralyzed.

"We had a long talk about you, how smart you are," Dr. X chirped, "about your amazing family. Now, Mrs. Malloy, I'm afraid we're late. We have to hit the road." He picked up the suitcase and stepped forward to put an arm around my shoulder.

"First, let me use the bathroom." I ran upstairs. My thought was of the .38. The door to the closet was ajar. I fumbled with the light cord, heard Dr. X behind me. Reaching up, I pushed aside the imitation alligator binocular case, the bag full of Christmas ornaments. I tore through the shelf.

"No, the gun isn't there," said Dr. X. "I remembered your mentioning it, so I looked. I also tried to find my property which you stole." He stood at the head of the stairs. "You caused me considerable professional embarrass-

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ment, Kevin. Are you going to summon your imaginary friend? I'm ready."

"Get out of this house!" I stood all alone.

Dr. X advanced slowly, speaking hypnotically. "You bad little boy. First you are going to return the vitamins and minerals you stole. Then you, and I hope your Doppelgänger, are going to come out to the house for a little therapy."

The back stairs were at the end of the hall. I edged toward them. "Stand still, Kevin," Dr. X said softly. "If you run, I will do something very regrettable to Granny." He stepped forward and grabbed my arms.

Below, the front door opened and a voice called, "Mary? Kevin?" It was Aunt Tay. "Mary, do we have guests?"

"Dr. Axelrod came by to take Kevin on a trip. They're upstairs."

Dr. X didn't hesitate. "Stacey's the one who told me how to find you here. Told me to bring you back." My body felt weightless as he propelled me down the stairs.

Before us in overcoat and suit, a hat set on her head, stood Aunt Tay. "Yes?" she said in a voice which had quelled generations of graduate students.

"Pardon me, madam," said Dr. X. "But young Kevin is due at an overnight seminar the school has organized. And I. . . ."

"Indeed?" She looked at me. "Kevin?"

I tried to speak. No sound came out.

"Let go of him," she said. "I'm his guardian."

"Ah, his Aunt Tay! He's mentioned you. His grandmother and I have already discussed this." He started forward. I bobbed with him like a balloon. My grandmother stood at the living room door. These two women were so frail. I didn't want anything to happen to them. "If you will excuse me, madam," said Dr. X, trying to move past her.

Aunt Tay did not step aside. Instead she looked at me and said, clear and steady:

BY FELL NIGHT

My mouth wouldn't work. She repeated:

BY FELL NIGHT

Again I couldn't speak. "An interesting folk rite," said Dr. X. "Perhaps I can return someday and record it." He made to move past her. Tay said:

BY FELL NIGHT

And what sounded like my mother's voice back when I was a little kid

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answered:

WITH STICK AND BONE

Tay said:

BY BLACK LIGHT

And I turned to see my grandmother answer, her voice young:

DOWN NARROW ROADS

When Tay said:

BY CAT'S SIGHT

My grandmother responded:

THROUGH TIMES HARD AS ROCK

Dr. X said, "This young man has prostituted himself. He stole pills and prescription pads. He needs treatment."

BY OWL'S FLIGHT

Said Tay. My own voice way at the back of my throat was more a moan than anything as I answered along with my grandmother:

PAST FEAR THAT FREEZES BLOOD

"Ladies," said Dr. X. "Kevin, here, is a most rare and fascinating case. Doppelgänger syndrome. In other words, he has a double." Giving no sign that she had heard, Tay chanted:

BY MAIN MIGHT

Dr. X tugged at me but I wouldn't move. "Let me work with Kev. . . ." Something crackled like ice breaking. Dr. X choked. My grandmother and I answered:

OVER NIGHTMARE'S DARK BRIDGE

Tay never raised her voice:

BY ALL RIGHT

Our final response was:

I WILL COME TO YOU

A silence followed. Dr. X tried to speak and couldn't. My grandmother could. "My son is a police officer," she said. "Get out of this house, or I'll have you arrested."

Tay stared stony faced. It took a long moment, but Dr. X finally let go of me and backed out the door. He made certain signs with his fingers like he was warding off evil spirits.

"Who was that?" my grandmother asked as the door closed. Then she felt tired and went upstairs to rest. The last few days and the weeks before

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that and the months all the way back to summer caught up with me. I slumped against the wall.

Tay led me out to the kitchen, fed me bread and butter, hot soup and cocoa. She sat with me and said, "The things that man said can't be so. But even if they are, I love you."

I couldn't reply.

"With your mother too, I called it Faileas. It was too much for her, poor pet."

"Faileas?" I got out the words with difficulty, my throat was so tight.

"A Shadow. Such as you have. Sometimes you should pay a little attention to what old women say. Not always, mind you. At my age, words whiz about in the head like bees."

I looked at her, wanting more, and she asked, "Remember the story I used to tell about Prince Caoimin? How at his birth all the small folk,the fairies good and bad, stood over his crib and hurled wishes at him? One side wished him happy days, the other grievous nights, one side great wealth, the other bitter poverty, one the hand of the princess, the other lonely death.

"Now, I know you feel too grown up for such things. But think how it could be that there were just too many wishes for one tiny baby to handle. Maybe in their trying to win the wishing they put too great a burden on one small head."

Once, I would have grown impatient. But this lady may have saved my life with a poem, so I listened. "When your mother was born, your grandmother knew she would have no more children. Your grandfather had won her with his brains and charm. But he had his black side, all drinking and violence. His sons are well enough but they feared and respected only that black side of him.

"Mary wanted something better for Ellen. She tried with my help to give her blessings. We thought we had succeeded. But your grandfather had his hand on her too. She was his favorite and deep in her lurked the very essence of him. It was the same when you were born. We wished but he touched you."

The tea kettle whistled and when she rose to take it off the flame, her step was a little unsteady. "All of us from myself to the Pope have two selves, good and bad. It's the way we are. What was sad was to see your mother as pained as one who's been cut in two, unable to be at peace until she died."

When she sat back down, the house was absolutely silent. Maybe it was

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my Shadow's being absent, maybe the drugs and terror were shock treatment. But at that moment I realized that my mother was never coming back. I remembered the two faces in the photo, smiling and apologetic and scowling and malign. Good and bad, both halves of her were dead.

That night, finally, I was able to cry for her. Right then, I cried for all poor souls who find themselves cut in two. I cried for my grandmother and for Tay and myself. I cried for drunks and users, for the crazed and the scared of this fucked up world. Sweet Jesus, that night I cried for us all.

Part Three

FOR THE next week or so, I was stunned by grief. The world was a distant rumor. At school, kids talked about applying to Harvard and MIT. My mourning was so delayed that no one but Tay recognized it. No Shadow dogged me, no red MG flickered at the corner of my eyes. Common sense should have kept me away, but stark loneliness drew me to the Y.

Saturday morning, the Gallery was silent and empty. As I paused, an iron hand grabbed my arm. Turning, I saw a raincoat and a long Irish face, a cop. "Looking for the pool, son?" Jumping at the bait, I nodded eagerly. He led me to the locker room and said, "Another bathing beauty," to a big man with a Y sweatsuit.

The trap sprang. They knew. With a sadist's smile, the man pointed to a locker. "STRIP DOWN, PUNK!" Scared, I obeyed. They laughed when I shivered bare ass, unable to meet their eyes. "MOVE IT, LITTLE GIRL!" I ran to the piss and chlorine stinking pool.

A hunting party of counselors in trunks waited there. They knocked me into the water and held me under. They cheered when I choked and stamped my hands when I tried to get out. A couple I knew from school or the Gallery. They were the worst.

Then they were gone. I heard their shouts as they turned the showers on a fully clothed kid who wouldn't strip. He saved me. Slipping, gasping, shinnying wet into pants, shoving on loafers, I grabbed my jacket, abandoned everything else and got away.

Coming home frozen and half drowned, I felt I could fall no lower. I was wrong. Uncle Jim stood in the kitchen washing dust off his hands. "Here he

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is," Gramny said brightly. I was glad she wouldn't notice how messed up I'd gotten.

But Jim did. "Enjoy your swim?" he asked. All I wanted was to get to my room and lick my wounds. But sensing my weakness, he followed me into the hall. "Your Uncle Mike tells me they got a vice sweep on." He saw me wince.

His breath was boozy as he said, "We got some matters to discuss. Like your future." Noticing I was still damp, he added, "Maybe you should go in the navy, you like water so much."

The navy sounded like three years worth of what had just happened to me. I was still shaking. "Let's talk later, Jim."

Angry, he always got quiet. But he never lost the smile. "Is it the dope that makes you not understand me? We're going to have a little walk and talk." As with the man at the Y, I saw he meant me harm. And again, I folded.

My uncle shoved me out the back door. His Caddy was parked at the end of the driveway. "You look like shit. I see you wasting your time in school. I want you to pre-enlist before graduation, not wait for the draft. I want it settled today."

"My college boards are good enough. My mother said there was the money her father left." I sounded pathetic.

We paused next to the fence at the end of the street and he said, "Like we've been trying to tell you, there is no money. It got used up. On your mother. On other stuff. Understand?"

Not knowing what to say, I just stared at him. Fast as a snake, the back of his hand caught the side of my face. My head bounced on the chain links. He hit me again. Far below, Boston Harbor spun. I tasted blood.

"Understand?" he repeated. This time I managed to nod. "You stupid bastard, it's about time someone took you down a few pegs." He hit me again. My head jerked back.

"You think I don't know about your personal habits? The goof balls? About how you earn pocket money? I look at you and I know." With each question, he shook me. "Understand?"

Instead of nodding I dodged. He hit me left-handed on the side of the head. My ear rang. "Big commotions here last week," he said. "Mom let it slip about some guy looking for you. Shithead, keep your freak friends away from her and Tay. Understand?"

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I nodded but he smacked me anyway. "Understand?"

"Yes, yes I understand. . . please don't!"

"And while you live in this house, which won't be for long, you keep your hands off what doesn't belong to you. What did you do with that .38?"

"Nothing." I braced for another blow.

It didn't come, though he didn't believe me. "There's other stuff missing. Papers. Mom. . . . She forgets. Mom took your mother's death hard. Me too. I'm not letting you get like your mother." Reflectively, Jim banged my head against the fence a couple of times.

He pushed me toward the car. "Get in. We got to do something about you." I noticed Mrs. Reardon next door, a delivery boy from Snyder's among others, observing with great interest the public display of my fall. Word would get around Queena Heaven.

The afternoon seemed flat and metallic, unreal even while it happened. Jim drove to Field's Corner and brought me into his bar. We went back into his little office. "You could save us both trouble, if you knew about those documents." My mind was frozen. I really didn't remember taking them. He gave me a whiskey and made me sign papers. The whiskey numbed the pain in my mouth. "You got nothing on under your coat. What the hell's wrong with you?"

He made me put on a white shirt a few sizes too big. Then he took me to a barber who was an old army buddy. "Kevin is going in the service," he announced as clippers ran over my temples.

Afterwards he stopped in another place to drink and place a couple of bets. I sat beside him in shock. The face in the bar mirror was no longer mine.

Jim's beating was professional. The face was unbruised. But swelling had turned the eyes into narrow slits. The hair was gone except for a half-inch-high swath on top of the head. It was the face the Shadow had worn in the dream the week before.

Jim saw my expression. "Any further thoughts on what happened to the .38?" he asked. Once I remembered the dream, I knew where the gun was. But I just shook my head and he didn't press me. Jim knew just how to put someone over the edge.

At the recruiter's office, the sergeant was another of Jim's pals. I signed papers there too. The sergeant said it was good doing this now and that they'd take me right after school. He gave me something for Tay to sign as my

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guardian. By then none of this mattered.

To make sure I had nothing to live for, Jim said as he dropped me off, "You've been hiding behind women too long. Next weekend, I'm moving you out of here to somewhere that I can keep an eye on you. Get Tay's signature. Any whining to her and I'll kick your ass."

Tay was home when I walked in the door. "Oh, Kevin," she said and other stuff. But my ears hummed and I didn't hear. What had happened hurt too much to tell her. My future was hell. But it didn't matter. I wouldn't be around for it. I fell face down on my bed and passed out.

When I awoke, it was deepest night. Confused, aching, I got up and took off the unfamiliar shirt with prickly hairs down the back. Guys from school had seen me that morning. Nowhere in the city could I hold up my head. But I had the cure.

On my desk was a note from Tay, a plate of sandwiches and a glass of flat ginger ale. The note read:

BY ALL RIGHT
I WILL COME TO YOU

It meant nothing to me. I couldn't eat. But my thirst was intense, so I drank the soda.

The house was cold, silent. In my grungy jeans, I padded down the hall and opened the door of what had been my mother's room. In the dream, my Shadow had said, "Her brothers are still afraid to go in there."

Remembering, I lifted the mattress. There was the .38 and the ammunition. All I had to do was load the revolver and blow off the side of my head. Picking it up, I saw a vial of pills.

"Shoot yourself," said a voice behind me. "And you finish Jim's work for him. Like our mother did. He set you up for this. Look, I laid something aside. A couple of those codeine will cut your pain."

The magic my Shadow brought was black. But it was magic. "How's life been without me?" he asked. "Pool parties? Manly outings with Uncle Jim? Going to send me away? No, huh."

Back in my room, stoned, I held the revolver at the ready and looked in the mirror again. Instead of a face I didn't recognize, I saw a face that could be anyone: all-American boxer, army recruit, hired killer. And this time, I saw it twice.

I slept most of Sunday. Not wanting to involve Tay, I didn't talk much.

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All she could do was pat my hand. Monday morning, on my way into school, I saw a familiar face. One of the guys from the Y pool. Hate twisted me. Standing in his path, I looked death into his eyes. By himself, he was frightened. And he should have been. I had a loaded .38 in my school bag.

In study hall that day, guys stared at me and whispered a story that was going around. I dropped Dexedrine and looked at the papers from my locker. I got scared, then angry. Documents ran from my grandfather to my mother, from my mother to me. I owned a share of the house and Jim was trying to throw me out. It seemed I owned a small part of his bar. Without Tay's signature the army enlistment was worthless.

The Drama Society rehearsed after school. A couple of people looked at me strangely. Grebesky, a forward on the hockey team, was Mistress Quickly, the tavern keeper. Grebesky had his moves down but he couldn't remember his lines. Nobody laughed as Mr. Royce, the drama advisor, kept prompting him.

In my ear, the voice said, "Early tomorrow, we'll go visit Uncle Jim and have a little talk." The thought made me uneasy.

Then I realized there was a stir on stage. "Take five," said Mr. Royce. "Grierson, get down here."

At first, I thought I'd missed a cue. Wondering what the big deal was, I came off the stage into the gloom of the auditorium. And my eyes bugged. Royce stood in the center aisle. Stacey was with him. "Nothing to worry about, Grierson," he said. "Your cousin assures me it's just a minor family emergency."

"They were really nice about letting me in," said Stacey in an unfamiliar bright, chirping voice. She had on a blue dress with a Peter Pan collar. "When I called, Grandmother said you were here." She smiled girlishly. "Sorry to take Kevin away, Mr. Royce. It was fascinating watching you direct."

Royce stared at her, enchanted. Girls hardly ever entered the school. I could hear the guys on stage behind me, panting. It turned out we came from a real affectionate family. "Hey, cuz!" I said and kissed Stacey on the mouth.

"Very good, Grierson, you can go. Try to pay more attention," said Mr. Royce. As I picked up my coat and book bag, he added roguishly, "You never told me you had such a lovely cousin."

"Right," I muttered as we walked through the rotunda and out the door. "I can imagine that coming up in conversation. 'Don't give me detention, sir,

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I have a lovely cousin.'"

"He's a filthy pervert," Stacey said matter-of-factly. Out on the street, she glanced around, then she looked at me, assessing. "I need your help."

I was looking too. Now that she wasn't putting on an act, Stacey seemed tense, desperate. I stayed cool. "What's wrong?"

"Dr. X. He's up in New Hampshire, collecting money, drugs. He's coming back tonight. Then he's taking me to Mexico." She took my hand. "Kevin, he's crazy and I'm scared."

I wanted her. My life depended on it. But I just said, "Don't go."

She shook her head. "It isn't that easy. Things are slightly out of control. My mother and stepfather are coming back next week. Dr. X threatens to stay in the house and confront them. My father has wanted to hospitalize me all along. If I can't straighten the situation out, my mother will let him."

Because of how she had helped wreck my life, I said, "You told me to get lost. You told Dr. X where I lived and about the Gallery."

"No, I said you weren't ready yet. And he forced me to tell. I was stuck in the god-damn oubliette. In my own house. You humiliated him and he took it out on me. Today he locked me in the bedroom but I got out. Kevin, I recognized something in you the first time we met. Seeing you now, I know you can get rid of Dr. X."

I hesitated. But my Shadow whispered, "Dr. X is a punching bag. Tell her about your fee."

"Before I get rid of Dr. X," I told Stacey and used the same gesture Joe in the Gallery used to indicate the two of us.

She said, "You're a creep." But the deal was made.

Looking up and down the block, I asked, "Where's the MG?"

"Dr. X has it. He says it's his now. That's another thing. You have to get it back." She started walking toward the streetcars and I followed. "When I first met him he seemed brilliant. After what you did to him, everything dried up, the drugs, his power. Everyone who hung around deserted. Even that toad Max."

We didn't speak much on the steamy, crowded car out to her mother's house. Anticipation kept me hard and on edge. I watched Stacey. She was beautiful. There's a brief time in youth when depravity does no more than refine the features.

By night her stop looked like something out of a European spy movie,

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gleaming tracks, frosted breath, figures walking in overcoats as faces at lighted windows moved past in the other direction. "In case this is a trap," said the Shadow, and I slipped the revolver out of the bag into my overcoat pocket.

The house, it turned out, was dark and silent. Stacey picked up a half empty bottle of J&B in the kitchen and took it up to the master bedroom. We both took a swallow. As we undressed, I took deep sleeping breaths and watched Stacey.

In soft light, she stepped out of her dress and her shoes, undid the stockings and slipped them off. She took off her bra and slid out of her panties. She sat on the bed and beckoned.

I'd dreamed this scene often. But all my experience was of people doing things with my body. Now that it was time to act, I smelled piss and chlorine, heard laughter. Remembering the shame, I froze. Those bastards that Saturday had crippled me.

"It's easy. Maybe even fun," my Shadow whispered. My hand brought up the bottle and I took a swig. My feet had trouble finding the floor. But Stacey wanted this to work. She put one hand on my waist, the other on my thigh, and guided me gently. When I came, it was a relief and wonder.

After that she let me play. At one point I felt like we were a pair of beating wings. I remember running my hands over every inch of her skin. I wanted, like I never had with anyone, to make Stacey want me. Caught in the moment, I forgot there was a meter running.

But Stacey didn't. The last thing she did was to kiss me long and hard on the throat just below my chin. "Something for those gorillas at school to see," she whispered. Then she rose and I noticed that exactly half an hour had elapsed.

We smoked a cigarette, had some more whiskey. "Sorry to spoil things," Stacey said, "but he's going to be back soon." We dressed and she got busy.

Dr. X had already begun to pack. She moved a suitcase and a cardboard box full of papers down to the front hall. "He can take his things. What I want out of him is all the keys. And make sure he knows he can't return. Ever."

We put most of the lights out and Stacey went back up to the bedroom. After a few minutes she put on a record, the Goldberg Variations. I sat on the stairs with the .38.

Dr. X drove up fast. The car door slammed; his key was in the front lock.

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For an instant I panicked. But my Shadow whispered, "This will be fun too." My hands steadied as I slipped off the safety.

Dr. X flicked the switch in the front hall and the first thing he saw was his belongings. He looked flabby and flushed, like he had been drinking. Out of the darkness I said, "Good evening, Dr. X."

It took him just a moment to recognize my voice. "You little pussy. She let you fuck her. Now she thinks you're going to save her? No witches to help you? Weird kids like you disappear and nobody is at all surprised." He made a move.

I stood up and leveled the gun. Dr. X faltered. My pulses jumped. "Stacey wants the keys back. Lay them down on the table and you can take all of this you can carry. Understand?"

"I'm taking the car," he said and turned to leave. For a moment the gun was leveled at the back of his head. Then I raised it and squeezed hard.

WHAM! The revolver jumped like a snake. The explosion and the impact of the bullet in the wall above his head were simultaneous. I had never fired a gun before. But I heard myself say, "That felt good!"

Dr. X stood frozen. "Empty out your pockets. Understand?" I said. He didn't jump fast enough. "UNDERSTAND?"

When Stacey came out of the bedroom and stood at the head of the stairs, I had Dr. X lying face down on the floor. She went and called a taxi.

"I think you've done remarkable work integrating Super Ego and Id," said Dr. X. "But I also see you turning that gun on yourself unless you're careful. I know what you're really into, Kevin. Forget that spoiled bitch. You need a man like me."

For a while, I listened appreciatively. I really had learned stuff from him, and he talked a great show. But he began to whine and I had to press the gun into the back of his head to shut him up. When the taxi came, I let him take his belongings.

As the taillights disappeared down the driveway, Stacey descended and looked at the hole in the wall. "Firing that gun was really stupid," she said. "I hope I can get all this fixed up before Mother gets back."

I unloaded the revolver, stuck it back inside the book bag. "I don't even know his real name."

"Botley, Herbert Botley. He taught freshman psych." Stacey sounded like she had already dismissed him from her mind.

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It occurred to me that it would be nice to be close to her again. Reaching out, I suggested, "Let's go back upstairs."

"That wasn't part of the bargain. Do you let your customers have extras?" Startled, I was silent. She showed me to the door without a kiss. "I'm leaving right after you. Repairmen will be here in the morning. Do you need money to get home?"

I shook my head. "Maybe I can call you."

"I don't think so," Stacey said, closing the door.

That just about broke my heart. At the same time I kind of admired how she had carried everything off. It was cold. I stuck my hands in my pockets and listened to my Shadow.

"Tomorrow we visit Uncle Jim. We go out early when he's nice and hung over. Wait in the garage. Show him the gun, let him know the family curse is still in operation. We want money and we want him to stay far away from us. But I don't think that will be a problem. A bullet or two in the dashboard of his Caddy and he'll cry real tears."

I felt better about it than I had before. But I still wasn't happy. "What about school?" As we approached the station, a streetcar swung out of the dark a few hundred feet down the track. We picked up our pace.

"Forget school. Tay understands what's happening. Or thinks she does. She'll cover for us. Forget Boston. We should go to New York before Christmas. Find girls who make Stacey look like Grebesky. Sugar Daddies. Guys like Joe but rich. We should go to college there."

It sounded good. We crossed the outward bound tracks as the streetcar stopped. My Shadow boarded right behind me.

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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

JUST LIKE REAL PEOPLE

White Queen, Gwyneth Jones, TOR, 1993. $19.95

Bears Discover Fire, Terry Bisson, TOR, 1993. $19.95

Short Takes: *The Pure Cold Light*, *Argyll*, *The Rediscovery of Man*, *Testing*

THIS EDITION is the first American appearance of Gwyneth Jones's *White Queen*, published in the U.K. in 1991. The novel was well received by those few who saw it in the U.S. back then, sharing the first James Tiptree Award for gender-bending sf with Eleanor Arnason's *A Woman of the Iron People*.

It's an alien contact story, but of a decidedly unusual type. In 2038, three groups of humanoid aliens land secretly in remote areas of the Earth; they are human enough that they can pass among us and go unremarked, but alien enough that once they attract attention their difference is obvious — and unsettling. Eventually they get dubbed the Aleutians.

The main human characters through whom we see the Aleutians are Johnny Guglioli, a U.S. journalist who has lost his job and been exiled to Africa, and Braemar Wilson, a British video journalist in search of anti-establishment news. Other human characters include a feminist diplomat, an eccentric German scientist, and a Japanese protector of the Aleutians. We also get the alien side of things, primarily through the Aleutian "Clavel."

The Aleutians reveal themselves to Earth governments and announce their desire to settle on Earth. Confusions, conflicts and negotiations follow. The alien contact eventually changes human institutions while

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fostering terrorist resistance. Should we accept the Aleutians as friends or reject them as a threat? Jones does not offer an easy answer.

The Aleutians have no gender, but because they consider questioning of their biological makeup an aggressive act no one figures this out: they appear as male or female depending on the degree to which they possess, as individuals, those traits we associate with men and women. Clavel is called "Agnes" in the first section of the book, and Johnny, not understanding alien sexuality, assumes "her" to be female based on her poetic personality, purity and innocence.

As much as humans misread the Aleutians, the Aleutians misread humanity. They don't understand human sexuality: they're concerned about the "War Between the Broods" that takes place on Earth. By this they don't mean international conflict, but the conflict between men and women. Looking to contact the government of Earth, they don't go to the United Nations, but to an international conference on women's issues. Just like real people, they are most frightening when they think they understand something that they are getting totally wrong. This shows itself in their humorous garbling of human idioms ("Talk loudly and carry a little stick."), in one of the novel's most disturbing scenes (a human-alien "date rape"), in the novel's climactic, devastating misunderstanding.

Jones's Aleutians are among the most plausible yet frightening aliens ever presented in fiction. The action, a direct result of their differences, is comic and chilling. Johnny concludes that "Humans and aliens were so alike...two almost identical surfaces, at first glance seamlessly meeting, at a closer look hopelessly just out of sync, in every tiny cog of detail."

But Jones is out to do more than present aliens. One of the most intriguing things about this story is what you could call its "fractal" quality. In a fractal, the same patterns are reflected on the microscopic and macroscopic levels. In *White Queen*, the same problems of communication and projection are at work in Aleutian-human diplomacy, in male-female relationships on Earth, in the Clavel-Johnny relationship, and in the love affair that develops between Braemar and Johnny. In the beginning Braemar uses her sexuality to influence Johnny into helping her get a story. For a while Johnny sees her as his enemy. Though they never entirely understand each other, they fall genuinely in love. Their relationship is as complex as those in real life,

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combining sex, expediency, ambition, selfishness and selflessness. Johnny and Braemar use each other, misunderstand each other's motives, make assumptions based on sexual images, want things secretly from each other, hide parts of themselves they don't want to reveal, project images that are not always accurate, manipulate and suffer guilt and doubt. Just like real people.

In respect to its sexual complexities, I think it's appropriate that *White Queen* won the Tiptree award. James Tiptree Jr., as you know, was the pseudonym of Alice Sheldon. Robert Silverberg got himself into a lot of hot water, in the early seventies, when he insisted in an introduction to a collection of Tiptree's stories that "there is to me something ineluctably masculine about Tiptree's writing. I don't think the novels of Jane Austen could have been written by a man nor the stories of Ernest Hemingway by a woman." Silverberg's taken a lot of criticism for saying this, but I want to pursue the line of thought he opened.

Is there such a thing as "male" and "female" writing? I think a case can be made. Silverberg's problem was assuming only men could write "male" fiction and only women "female." Although it's dangerous to use gender terms to describe qualities of writing in a society where "male" qualities have been valued over female, if there's anything to such a distinction, I'd call Jones's writing male. It's full of ideas, dispassionate, not particularly stylish, and occasionally ruthless. In its preference for brains over emotion it has some of the traits of the classic sf adolescent.

This is not a complaint. But it does lead to problems. In the *Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* John Clute calls Jones "a writer of nearly unforgiving intensity, and on occasion an incompetent storyteller." I don't know what he means by that, but *White Queen* is a hard read. For instance, Jones often switches viewpoints whenever she likes in the middle of scenes. This can provide some wonderful ironies as we get two characters' completely different takes on the same situation, but it also leads to confusion. Additionally, Jones is not a graceful stylist. She skips explanations when she thinks the explanations are obvious, jump cuts, makes weird connections. She'll pursue an intricate chain of reasoning so rapidly she loses track of her pronouns, leaving the reader to cast about trying to find the antecedents. I had the feeling when I read this novel that I didn't understand all the implications Jones intended me

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to get, either because I wasn't picking up cues or because she wasn't dropping them clearly.

Don't get me wrong: in an sf book, sometimes it's a virtue to be kept off balance. I like this complex, cool, original, odd book a lot. The constant viewpoint switches, besides giving us a multiplex view of "reality," keep us from becoming comfortable with any one viewpoint, and thus leave the moral answers to our own evaluation. Determining Jones's opinion is a matter of triangulation. Who are the villains, the good guys? Should we hope for anti-Aleutian terrorism to succeed? Are humans doomed, or is a utopia pending? Is Braemar Wilson a cold manipulator or a true lover? But maybe that's the point — at one time or another, most of us are both. Jones's aliens, both manipulators and victims, are only the most extreme example of this. They are innocents and cruel judges, strangers and mirror images. Just like real people.

Terry Bisson has developed a strong reputation as a short story writer in record time. *Bears Discover Fire* is his first collection.

I have lived in the South now for eleven years (although to some from the Deep South, North Carolina might as well be Wisconsin). One of the things I've gotten familiar with is southern fiction and its traditions. Southern writers like to argue about the definition of southern lit, who can write it, and whether it even exists, in the same way that sf people argue about sf. One of the ways they distinguish southern lit is by the concept of "voice." From *Huckleberry Finn* to *The Sound and The Fury* there's a tradition in the South of stories told in the first person by somebody who has a distinctive regional voice.

Unlike regional writers, science fiction writers are not noted for voice. We tend to strive for a transparent style that focuses attention on the strange thing or events we're telling about, not on the voice of the teller. Yet here's Terry Bisson with a collection of nineteen stories, virtually all told in the first person, and in most of which we get a distinct sense of the person speaking. Quite often this person is a middle-aged man of ordinary middle-class background. He speaks, not in some cornpone hick accent, but still with a rural twang to his laconic voice. He talks about hard work and diesel engines and the best way to change spare tires. His surroundings are detailed, practical, and even when they are imaginary, somehow mundane. I've occasionally seen something like this in sf (for

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instance, in Nancy Kress's "Out of All Them Bright Stars," which is told by a waitress at a backwoods diner), but no one has mined this evocative territory like Bisson.

Take for instance Bisson's first published short story, "Over Flat Mountain." The premise of this story is pretty far-fetched: some time in the near future a geological cataclysm, "the Uplift," pushes the Appalachian mountains up into a huge flat mountain range, a dome that rises above the Earth's atmosphere and separates the midwest from the Atlantic seaboard. But life, and long haul trucking, go on, with a few modifications like 35,000 foot cog railways, robot trans-mountain trains, and pressurized vacuum-proof trucks. A middle-aged trucker (Bisson is great at writing middle-aged men) bound from Indianapolis to Charlotte picks up a hitchhiker in whom he recognizes the boy he himself was when he first left home.

After various adventures, the driver and the sleeping boy are coming down the long slope from the airless heights of the mountain into Charlotte:

I was in high third. On either side of the highway, nothing but miles and miles of stone. It's amazing to me that so many people could live for so long in those mountains and leave so little sign. Twenty miles further and the road got steeper, going down. I had to gear down to low fifth. I popped in Hank Senior and the kid whimpered a little from a dream. At that minute I might have been driving past his great-granddaddy's grave. I could tell from the way he talked it was up here somewhere — somewhere between eastern Kentucky and western North Carolina, northern Virginia, and east Alabama. Somewhere in those endless wrinkled little hills that got unwrinkled and raised up, and rolled their children out into the world, rubbing their eyes and wondering when they get to go home.

In evocative moments like this, these stories also resemble contemporary mainstream fiction more than most sf today. The characters of "Over Flat Mountain" would not be out of place in a Bobbie Ann Mason story; despite its bizarre circumstances the story illuminates ordinary life.

The miraculous thing is, the conviction this central — and centered — grown-up male voice carries enables Bisson to get away with premises that do not always bear intellectual inspection. This is not a complaint. But even when he's writ-

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ing science fiction he's really writing fantasy.

Bisson's lesser stories are backhanded toss-offs. In his afterword he calls them "conceits," as good a term as any for stories that depend on a single clever idea, a strange juxtaposition, or an O. Henryesque twist. Sometimes, as with "They're Made of Meat" or "The Two Janets," these work to fine comic effect; sometimes they go awry. In "Carl's Lawn and Garden," for instance, the eponymous Carl and his female assistant race around New Jersey attempting to save the last living plants. A prestigious university spends millions to grow real trees on their quadrangle for image purposes, yuppie suburbanites take pride in their real grass lawn (supported by tons of chemicals and fertilizer tanks), and a restaurant, fed up with the trouble keeping real trees alive, settles for a hologram. As an environmental satire this is pretty damned amusing. But when the story turns allegorical in the last scene, the whole enterprise turns queasy with piety.

Other environmental short-shorts fare better. "By Permit Only" takes an idea the Bush administration floated at one point, that polluters could buy a license to pollute from the EPA, and carries it to hilarious extremes. What if people could buy licenses to commit other sorts of social and legal transgressions? Bisson starts with a situation of near believability and escalates mercilessly — and hilariously — to a furious ending. Underneath the crazed surface this is an angry story, a savage satire up there with Swift in "A Modest Proposal," or, closer to the genre, Pohl and Kornbluth at their blackest,

"Cancion Autentica de Old Earth" and "The Coon Suit" are spooky mood pieces, almost surreal glimpses of alternative worlds. "Two Guys From the Future" is the funniest sf comedy this side of Connie Willis. "England Underway," with understated humor, tells the story of Mr. Fox, a resident of Brighton, England to whom nothing much ever happens, and the extraordinary manner in which he finally comes to visit his niece in Long Island. The most science fictional story of the lot is perhaps "The Shadow Knows," a first contact story set on the moon, but even here the point seems to be the basic unknowability of the universe. There's a kind of elegiac quality for the future that used to be somehow more vivid and pure than the one that eventually came to pass.

"Necronauts," which fills the format of a commercial sf story without informing it, is one of Bisson's weaker efforts. But at his best, in

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stories like the Nebula and Hugo Award-winning "Bears Discover Fire," he goes beyond conceit to profundity. It's hard to say what exactly makes such stories work so well. It's not that the ideas behind them are any less absurd than those of his japes. Perhaps it's that in them, Bisson takes his world more seriously. The characters, rather than grotesques and parodies, are fully fleshed humans. We may not know much about them, but these mature men speak with the voice of experience. They have quietly watched the world and seen things, though they may not speak of them.

"Bears Discover Fire" tells of the relations between sixty-year-old bachelor Uncle Bobby, his aging mother, his brother Wallace and his nephew Wallace Jr. The miraculous bears of the title are in the background, living on the medians of the Kentucky interstate. It's a story about aging, death, youth, and the preservation of humanity in a world where things are inevitably changing. The bears' discovery of how to use fire offers a glimpse of another world, a more meaningful way of life that humans once led but can't go back to. The story's haunted by a sense of loss. I'm not sure what it all comes to in the end, but I'm sure it comes to something significant, and I guess the story's popularity must mean that this comes across to a lot of people. When Wallace Jr. gets the idea of shooting one of the bears, Uncle Bobby dissuades him: it would be wrong, he says, and besides, a twenty-two rifle wouldn't do much more than annoy a bear, and besides, it's illegal. This combination of the legal, the practical and the moral sums up something about the voice of Terry Bisson.

You won't find much conventional science fiction in this book, or conventional fantasy, either. Not that I think Bisson ought to make himself write more conventionally. Lots of people can write ordinary stories, not many have a unique voice, or the skewed viewpoint that informs these fairy tales about real people.

SHORT TAKES

The Pure Cold Light, by Gregory Frost. Avonova, 1993. $4.99.

Thomasina Lyell, a 21st century investigative journalist, pursuing Angel Rueda, a mysterious man she's encountered on an orbiting Geosat station, discovers a cover-up of a momentous lunar discovery. The multinational Scumbercorp's policy toward drug addicts is producing cosmic side effects. Meanwhile Rueda, a cranial bypass unit impairing his

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memory of just what happened on the moon, is pursued by the corporation's paid killers.

Beneath the mystery thriller this is a story about the dividing of the U.S. into mutually exclusive rich and poor, about citizens ignorant of the source of their distress, about life in the permanent underclass and the corporate decisions that foster this situation. Frost projects the bottom-line mentality of the 80s into a future where the president is a talk show host, people wear masks in the street, fast food giveaways contain experimental drugs and the government is a front for corporate interests. Like Alfred Bester's classic *The Demolished Man*, *The Pure Cold Light* plays within the framework of sf mystery-thriller at the same time it undercuts it with a cast of wounded grotesques. The result, if occasionally over the top, is vivid, cynical satire.

In the end a lot of loose ends are explained furiously and perhaps a little too tidily. But read this one for its bizarre details, complex background, its extremity, and its humane sympathy for people caught up in a world where public betrayal is a daily fact and the best most can hope for is survival.

Argyll, by Theodore Sturgeon. The Sturgeon Project, 1993.

In his best work, Theodore Sturgeon brought emotional intensity, evocative prose, and psychological complexity to the sf short story. *Argyll* is a brief but harrowing memoir, written in 1965, of Sturgeon's relationship with his stepfather William Sturgeon, known as Argyll — a cold, imperious man who made the young Sturgeon's childhood a torment. *Argyll* gives great insight into the many tormented and alienated children of Sturgeon's fiction, but more than that it is a clear-eyed human document about family dysfunction comparable to Kafka's "Letter to His Father." The chapbook also contains an actual letter Sturgeon sent to Argyll in the early 1950s. It gives me a respect for the forces Sturgeon struggled against throughout his career and illuminates both his triumphs as a writer and his failures. This is one of his best pieces of writing, full of complexity, reality, irony, and strong emotion without sentimentality.

There's an introduction by Paul Williams and a short afterword by Samuel Delany. Proceeds from the sale of *Argyll* will go to defray the costs of assembling *The Collected Stories of Theodore Sturgeon*, to be published by North Atlantic Books. *Argyll* is available for $10, plus $2 postage and handling, from Paul Wil-

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liams, Box 611, Glen Ellen, CA 95442.

The Rediscovery of Man, by Cordwainer Smith. The NESFA Press, 1993. $24.95.

"Cordwainer Smith" was the pseudonym of Dr. Paul Linebarger, a political scientist expert in Chinese culture and psychological warfare. In his brilliant decade publishing sf regularly (he died in 1966 at the age of 53) he created some of the strangest short fiction ever to grace sf. It holds up remarkably well. Smith brought an original voice and allusive vision to a complex future history including genetic engineering of animals, the evolution of interstellar travel and multiple worlds ruled by the immortal all-powerful Lords of the Instrumentality. Much of Linebarger's strangeness comes from his reflecting Chinese culture, history and politics in a distorted galactic mirror. This 671-page book collects all of Smith's "Instrumentality" stories (with exception of the novel *Norstrilia*) and his few non-Instrumentality stories. John J. Pierce provides an informative introduction. Smith's influence on several generations of later sf writers can hardly be underestimated, and a new generation of readers will find much to enjoy here,

Testing, by Charles Oberendorf. Bantam, 1993. $4.99.

In the 21st century, an economically crippled U.S. has instituted "morality testing" for all high school seniors. Students undergo virtual reality scenarios that test the morality of their reactions. *Testing* tells of the crucial week in the life of Karl, showing that morality in the abstract is a lot simpler than morality in the real world. At times I found Karl and his problems much less interesting than the changes in American society — such as the complete transformation of the American family to the point where marriage is less common than uncles acting as heads of households — alluded to in the story's background. Still, there's considerable complexity, some subtle characterization, and quite a haunting ending to this ironic novella.

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Jeff Bredenberg has worked in journalism since he was sixteen years old. He is currently Assistant Managing Editor of The News Journal in Wilmington, Delaware, where he lives with his wife, Stacey Burling, (also a journalist) and his son Adam (who, Jeff says, writes illegibly with crayons). Jeff began his science fiction career during a brief period of unemployment in 1985, when he started writing his novel, The Dream Compass. *AvoNova published that novel in 1991, followed by* The Dream Vessel *and* The Man in the Moon Must Die.

"Imagine a Large-Breasted Woman..." is clearly the product of a man who has spent his life having his words edited.

Imagine A Large-Breasted Woman...

By Jeff Bredenberg

GOSSAP THE ATTENDANT began the unpleasant task of disconnecting the waste tube from my rectum. He did it somewhat gently. Must be an important visitor here to see me, I decided.

He tilted my restraining trough until I stood nearly erect, and the white tile of the floor rocked into view. The motion set my arm and leg frames turning in squeaky-steel circles. In prison, you see, I am allowed to move my limbs in constricted patterns — even exercise. The appearance of mercy is still important occasionally, even in cases such as my own.

Gossap was whistling *The Stars and Stripes Forever*, which he's not bad at, except when he botches the piccolo trills. He released my neck brace with a metallic snap and eased the rubbery tongue tie out of my mouth. Then he sprang the locks on the pin-wheeling limb restraints — whack, whack, whack, whack.

My stomach turned as I leaned out of the trough. Standing had become such an unnatural orientation. The corners of the room seemed cushioned

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by randomly shifting hydraulic supports. I took a halting step, and Gossap was there tugging at my shoulder, eager that I get my "land legs" back.

"Who is it?" I asked. "Who's the big-fuckin'-deal visitor?" My tongue was packed in peat moss, or so it sounded.

Gossap frowned—surely I was not so doped that I had forgotten the rules. He looked away and whistled the refrain again, ever more didactic. ("Be kind to your web-footed friends. . . ")

I waddled toward the room's plexiglass door, a thick slab of laser-dissipating material. I shuffled down the corridor to the processing room, where I surrendered my gown and allowed several federal employees to conduct their body search. One peered up my anus, where he found nothing but the bonding gel left behind by the waste tube. The motive was more humiliation than security — a rough reminder of whom I would answer to when my visit was done.

In the interview room sat a small, balding man with a round face. He wore spectacles — which, these days, meant either an arty affectation of the wealthy or a necessity of the lower class. Anyone with health insurance can afford ocular surgery.

The fellow wore a bow tie and a lived-in Harris tweed. His cheeks had that baby-smooth look of a permanent laser depilatory job. So.

"You got more than one of those white shirts, I'll bet," I said to him.

He did not stand. The little man motioned to an empty chair. He peeled the lid off of a styrofoam cup and set it in front of the chair he wanted me to take. Steaming black coffee.

"You don't know me," the man said. His eyes darted toward Gossap, who was locking the three of us into the room.

Oh, gawd. Things were getting complicated already — a terrifying prospect when your mind has been a bowl of inert jelly for six years. Just when I was starting to think I recognized this gentleman, he said that I would not. He clearly had intimidated the hospital staff, yet Gossap seemed to make him nervous.

I rolled my head in Gossap's direction.

"They never leave me alone," I said. "No telling what I'll do, left unsupervised."

The little man gave a knowing nod, a mannerism that sparked memories. I recalled the same man nodding knowingly to something I had said eons ago:

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in a restaurant. He speared a marinated artichoke in his salad bowl, and a small tear of juice blipped onto the tablecloth. And he was nodding — just like he was now. A decade back, maybe more.

"You're an editor," I said. "You bought a manuscript of mine once. We had lunch in here in Manhattan."

The little man shook his head. Gossap was still over by the door, frowning now.

"Mack, you should drink your coffee," my visitor said. "It'll clear your head."

I took a sip. It had a rancid chemical taste, reminiscent of bathroom tile cleaner. The editor bored into me with his stare, his eyes two half-inch bolts anchoring me to my seat and prohibiting me from reacting to the horrid taste.

"Delicious, no?" he murmured evenly.

"Mmmm," I replied.

But he had told the truth about clearing my head. A sparkling sensation fizzed across my tongue, whirled down my esophagus, and erupted into my limbs like minuscule fireworks. Ah. Nice coffee.

"I imagine," the editor said, "that you have been sedated for some time. They tend to use A2 mist here, I think."

"None of that!" Gossap interrupted. "You may not discuss hospital, um, treatment techniques."

But the editor was far ahead of Gossap. He wanted me to know that the gut-souring chemical in the coffee was releasing me from the grip of A2 mist.

A veil was being lifted from my eyes. Suddenly the little man leaning into the marred table between us had a name — Angus Doggler. He had a taste for antique clothes, martinis, and rare filet mignon. These things had been absent from my mind for many foggy years.

"So then," Angus Doggler said to me cheerfully. "Feeling up to it now, are we, Mack?"

"Up to what?" I asked.

"Up to what?" asked Gossap, who was fidgeting by the door.

A large circle of the door's plexiglass glowed orange and melted into fiery rivulets that seared Gossap's shoes. The attendant shrieked once, but a sickly crack-crack-crack tossed him to the floor, lifeless.

Someone — no, some *people* — had entered the room through the circle that had been burned through the door. They were blurred images, the sort

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of figures you glimpse out of the corner of your eye. They were a presence, although barely detectable, scuffling about the tile. And they had just killed Gossap.

Newly sure of my body, I stood. Doggler smirked at my confusion.

"I would like you to meet Iris and Cochran," he said. "They are wearing FPJs, garments that help the user avoid detection. Optical and psychological illusions."

"FPJs?"

I heard ripping Velcro, and a man's face appeared over Doggler's shoulder — Cochran, I assumed. Another rip, and Iris was showing her face, too.

"Fluoro-Protective Jumpers," Cochran said.

"Or, if you wish, Fuzzy Pajamas," said Iris.

Gossap stared up at us from the corner of the room with large, round, dead eyes. His neck looked broken.

"I would like to understand," I said.

"You will," Doggler said in a near whisper. "But we have to get you out of here first. Iris, give us our FPJs. Cochran, get the photonic cannon out of the corridor and break it down — we shouldn't need it again."

"Out of here? We're escaping?"

Iris handed me a wooly ball of fabric. A few inches from my face, its color swam with gray, green, and violet. Held at arm's length, it was virtually invisible.

I found the arm holes and started to dress.

"What is it, Cochran? You seem disturbed," said Doggler.

Cochran looked up from his work and pointed at the cup from which I had sipped the ghastly chemical. "You didn't catch it, Mr. Doggler? He said the cup was styrofoam."

"Ah," said Doggler.

"And he called the door plexiglass," Iris threw in.

"Goodness," said Doggler.

The footies on my FPJs were a bit loose, intended to cover street shoes which I no longer owned. Iris helped me with the Velcro straps at my wrists.

"I don't get it," I said.

"Styrofoam is a trademark," Doggler said. "It's capitalized, for one thing. And they don't make coffee cups out of Styrofoam anyway. You should call it plastic foam — a generic term."

"Okay, I get it. But who gives a shit?"

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"The door," Iris said, "is made of ferroplex, a completely different substance from Plexiglas. Which is spelled with a capital P and one S."

"Doggler, *who the fuck are these people?*"

Doggler was fastening the front of his suit, and he gave me an irritated glance.

"We have no time for chatter. We must hurry," he said. He nodded toward his accomplices. "What kind of muscle did you *think* I could round up? Cochran and Iris are copy editors."

Doggler pulled his face flap closed and disappeared like the Cheshire cat.

Doggler took the lead, and we formed a hand-in-hand chain. Into a freight elevator, down to a delivery tunnel, through a series of building maintenance rooms that whined with high gray machinery. At a final, battered door we removed our FPJs. Cochran handed me a yellow T-shirt and matching drawstring trousers and slippers. I pulled them on, cursing his taste in clothing, and we stepped into a public subway corridor.

It was a workaday morning in underground New York. Wingtips and umbrellas, the aroma of perfume and piss.

"I'm supposed to be inconspicuous, I suppose, dressed up like a ninja banana," I grumbled.

Iris was shaking out her hair, matted as it was from her suit hood. "It's a popular outfit, actually," she said, sounding defensive. So *she* had picked it out. "It's not businesswear, but you'll see them all over Greenwich Village."

Two flights of steps led us up into a honking, grit-gray morning.

Doggler made for a store-front coffee shop, and the copy editors and I followed.

"We can see each other now," Iris pointed out. "You have no need to hold my hand."

"Sorry," I said, releasing her. "It's been a while since I've done a sidewalk."

We found a remote table. Doggler visited the counter and returned with a tray bearing four styrofoam-dammit cups of coffee.

"I'm going to need money," I said.

Doggler's eyebrows rose as he stirred his coffee.

"What for?" asked Iris.

"Key West," I said. "I can disappear there, I think."

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Iris snorted.

Doggler shrugged. "Hold on now," he told his sidekicks. "Mack is free to go. I'll even kick in for shuttle fare and some pocket money. If it's Key West he wants."

"What about Roland T. Price, then?" asked Cochran.

Until that moment I had entertained a vision of sailboats, sunsets, and negligible clothing. The image evaporated. I stared at Cochran's pocked face. There was something theatrical about this conversation — the three of them had already plotted the course of our dialogue.

"Okay," I said. The very name already had me fuming. "What is it? What about Roland T. Price?"

Doggler slurped at his coffee. "I suppose there are publishing magnates that you have had more respect for in the past. . . ."

Iris giggled, and Doggler dealt her an angry frown.

". . . but Price is tightening the noose," Doggler continued, "especially in New York. Already he controls half of the book publishing houses, and separate subsidiaries of his are now making a run at Blackstone & Sons *and* our very own Stanton Little, Inc. If he succeeds, that'll be it — he'll have all the majors. The whole monopoly board, for Christ's sake."

"Roland T. Price only recognizes one kind of novel," I murmured. "Narrow little feel-good stories that have been hashed and rehashed for the last century."

"He thinks of himself as a purist," Doggler said.

"No — he's a puke-ist."

Cochran was alert. "Not a word," he declared.

"Nope," agreed Iris. "Puke-ist. Not a word at all. Besides, he's been quite successful from a financial standpoint."

"Otherwise he wouldn't have his Wall Street backing," threw in Cochran.

I tried the coffee. It was the real thing this time.

"So you broke into the prison-hospital," I said, "killed my attendant and freed me just so I could hear the morning business report?"

"Mack, I think you saw this publishing disaster coming longer than any of us," Doggler said. Behind those absurd spectacles his eyes were shifting conspiratorially. "And you took the hardest hit. Christ — ten years' rehabilitative treatment for — what did they call it?"

"Criminally undisciplined literature," I said. "Thou shalt not mix

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genres. Thou shalt not end a story with characters in despair. Thou shalt not employ surrealistic — "

"You are the antithesis of Roland T. Price," Iris interrupted. "*That's* why we freed you."

"We need a bit of out-of-house editing done," Cochran added. "And you're the right man for the job."

"Basically," said Doggler, dabbing a napkin at his mustache, "we want you to kill Mr. Roland T. Price."

I gulped at the coffee and felt the fluid scald its way down to my gut, which was now roiling with the tension of fury held in check. My chest was expanding with the pressure. The flimsy yellow T-shirt Iris had chosen grew taut around my biceps.

A gnarled man, barely four feet tall, had been waiting tables nearby. His jaw dropped and he showered a customer in cappuccino as he watched my shirt snap and rip into little yellow tendrils.

"Doggler, do you know this gnome?" I asked, pointing to the terrified waiter.

Doggler seemed amused by my transformation, and I made a mental note never to drink a cup of his coffee again. The gnome skittered behind the counter.

"You know what I'm after!" I bellowed, vaulting easily over the bagel display case. I grabbed the ancient creature by the beard and lifted him three inches from the linoleum. His feet pumped in vain. He gagged.

"A frightful blade," I prompted him, "the sight of which would freeze the heart of a polar bear."

His eyes bulged. His throat rattled. He pointed a palsied finger toward the cash register. There, a six-foot scabbard had been bolted to the underside of the counter. I tossed the wretch against the burnished-chrome FreezeLock doors and gave the haft of the sword a mighty tug.

The blade rang like a gong, and the entire restaurant fell silent, mesmerized by the bone-jarring tone. Its intricate jewel inlay threw myriad rainbows about the walls and ceiling.

The gnome righted himself wearily. "Keeps the crackheads at bay," he said, almost apologetic. "It's called the Dirge — sings of death."

I rounded the counter, knelt at Doggler's chair and kissed his right knuckle.

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"I had hoped you might be discreet," Doggler said, smirking.

"Does not seem to be possible," I replied.

I pulled Iris up from her chair. "I have not a moment to waste," I told her. "So as soon as you're ready, we have to run."

"What do you mean — ready?" she asked.

I gestured vaguely at her attire — prim little white blouse, corduroy vest and matching trousers. She was undeniably a beautiful woman, but her proportions were modest at best.

"This role," I said, "requires a large-breasted woman in a leather loincloth swinging a sword."

"I forgot to eat my Wheaties this morning, okay? You'll just have to, um, use your imagination."

We hit the sidewalk, leaving Doggler and Cochran to deal with the bill. I fell into a loping run, taking several feet in each stride, and found that Iris was keeping up nicely. The crowd parted for us obediently — a wall of jaded faces that could no longer be shocked by any form of attire but had the good sense to stand aside for a semi-nude man with a sword.

At the end of the second block, Iris and I ground to a halt. A bum had stepped in our way, hand out, mumbling something about the Moroccan Conflict. He stank of rotting meat.

"I need five dollars!" he declared.

"I got no wallet," I said, "and I got no time. Have to get up to 53rd Street right away."

"Ah," the bum said, consciousness suddenly gleaming in his eyes. "There be monsters!"

"I know," I said.

When we rounded the corner at 53rd, we found the street empty. Eddies of dust and a few old news faxes pinwheeled across the concrete canyon. Behind us, the Avenue of the Americas growled along, overpopulated as ever. Before us, ghost town.

A gust of wind struck, and my sword, the Dirge, moaned its low song.

Iris pointed to a black granite edifice with three revolving doors. "Price has his headquarters on the fourteenth floor, I think."

We each took a revolving door and entered the lobby simultaneously. Inside, back by the elevators, were a dozen huge men in trench coats. No, not men. Dragons. They stood fourteen feet high and milled about in their trench

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coats, dragging their scaly tails along the polished marble. They gave us little regard at first, smoking large cigars and grunting casually among themselves in what I took to be dragon language.

"Bad move," whispered Iris. "We'll find another way in."

I whirled the Dirge in a circle over my head, and the gleaming blade began to moan.

"Stand back," I told Iris. "I will mow a swath through their ranks and we will mount the stairs. If this is all he can muster in defense, Roland T. Price is as good as headless."

The dragons ceased their conversational grunting. They regarded us in silence and tapped on their cigars. A thick dusting of ash had accumulated on the marble, crisscrossed by tail marks.

A bloated-looking dragon stepped forward. His eyes were bloodshot, his face puffy and pale, and his nostrils throbbed.

the Dirge hummed *Hoooon, hoooon, hoooon* as I lunged forward.

The dragon's blast sounded like a shotgun. Suddenly the room was blinding white and Iris and I were summersaulting backward through the glass of the entryway.

I came to spread-eagled on the asphalt outside. Iris was picking a large shard of glass out of my left shoulder. Blood flowed from the wound.

"Do you think they'll come after us?" she asked.

I shrugged, and with that motion felt the gash starting to burn. For the moment, the dragons were staying put.

I stood slowly and looked for other damage. My last shreds of clothing had been scorched away, save for the yellow slippers, but my newly sterolic body seemed otherwise intact. the Dirge, having smacked against the far curb, was nicked and blackened — looking like an overused fireplace tool.

Iris had lost a good bit of hair in the blast, and patches of her blouse had burned away. Here and there the brush of her corduroy still smoldered.

"C'mon, c'mon," she said. "We'll duck into this store across the street. I have an idea."

The store was a Radio Shack. There didn't seem to be any customers, but the lights were on and the guy behind the counter was gawking toward the street, wondering what the explosion was all about.

"Splendid idea, Iris. What am I supposed to say in there? 'Hi. I'm an oversized naked man with a sword and yellow slippers. I've just escaped from

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an institution for crimes against literature. I'm bleeding and pissed off. Mind if I look around?'"

"Precisely," Iris said, tagging me on a newly massive pectoral. "If anyone objects to your presence, I'm sure they wouldn't be so rude as to say anything."

Iris took me straight to the row of padded booths at the back of the store. The clerk looked worried.

"Sir, you're bleeding," he said.

I held the Dirge aloft. "And I'm pissed off."

Iris popped the black matt cover on one of the booths and pushed me into the plush seat. She flipped through the plastic-wrapped headsets hanging in the wall display until she found an elaborate model that was inlaid with swirling holograms. In rapid and methodical movements, she tore away the plastic, shook out the tangle of wiring and jabbed two electrode needles into my forearms. She taped the needles into place.

"Here's the control board," Iris said hurriedly. "You work the joystick like so, and these keys at the same time — think of it as a standard keyboard that was left out in the sun."

"You want me to go after Price in the net, don't you?" I objected. "Pour my brain into some electronic gladiator's arena — see if I can hunt down the little pig on the financial strata while he's immersed in his takeover bids? Hah! I may have a few synapses misfiring, but I'll be damned if I'm going to fry my whole brain. Gimme my sword back — I like my odds better with the dragons."

Iris kicked at the Dirge and it clattered to the floor.

"Uh, ma'am?" said the clerk. He was sweating. "If he's going to buy that Jupiter rig, I'll be needing his name and address for our computer files."

"This is just a test drive, thanks," Iris replied. Then to me: "Don't worry. The entire net's been converted from electronics to photonics in the last ten years — thousands of times more efficient. Accidental brain rub is virtually unheard of. Someone'd have to attack you directly — and pretty savagely at that — to do you any damage."

"Comforting."

Iris set the opaque goggles over my eyes and prepared to seal me into the blackness of the booth. I felt her fingers on my cheek.

"Mack," she said gently. "Before you go, um, I want you to know — "

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"Yes?"

"Well, it's *somersault.*"

"Huh?"

"You said *summersault* earlier," she explained. "But *somersault* is preferred. And *the Moroccan Conflict*? Well, it was never a declared war, so you wouldn't capitalize the C, really. And now that I think of it, we'll have to look up *sterolic* — "

I reached out blindly, found the inner handle to the booth door, and pulled it closed.

The photonic strata went blipping past my frame of vision, a huge spinning card file. Grab one, and you plunge headlong into that particular simulated milieu where a segment of the computing world carries out its daily life. Transportation. The sciences. Writing. Finances. Graphics. Ah, there went publishing. There were several dozen strata, I guessed, repeating every few seconds. They were not labeled by any visible script. Rather you just *knew*, intuitively, that *that* strata was publishing. Maybe it was the faint odor of polished wingtips.

I grabbed publishing its next time around, and felt my pixilated body pour into it.

I was hurling through a pinwheeling galaxy, tearing past wisps of star formations and dust clouds. At the distant core was hellish darkness, an object so massive and dense that no light could escape from it. It consumed stars by the score, little pinpricks vanishing into its maw.

That, I knew, would be Roland T. Price. The black hole of publishing.

I fell toward the blackness, accelerating. The stars seared my face with every close pass. Faster. They lashed and scoured my skin. Then there was nothingness — a black, rubbery nothingness.

A pleasant forest appeared. I was standing amid the pine needles, naked but for yellow slippers. A squat man in a seersucker suit stepped from behind a broad redwood. He had a weak chin and heavy circles under his eyes.

"I seem to be paralyzed," I grunted through immobile teeth.

"I know," replied Roland T. Price — the photonic representation of him, anyway. "You should have stuck with the dragons. *They* had instructions to keep you amused all day. But *this* intrusion is an abominable waste of my time. We will finish quickly."

He bared two long fangs and crunched toward me across the digitized

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pine needles. The needle-like teeth glistened with simulated saliva. Price stroked at my frozen neck, stood on tiptoe and prepared to bite. I wondered how it would all end for my body — encased in a booth in that Radio Shack. Would it just slump over dead? Would it loll about brainless, needing a feed tube to subsist?

A great thrashing out in the forest broke Price's concentration, and I felt warmth returning to my muscles. Price waved an index finger in the air and shouted incomprehensible orders to, I assumed, the technological wizards who guarded his flanks in this photonic world.

The thrashing neared, and towering digitized trees were crashing to the forest floor, as if a mammoth scythe were sweeping its way toward us — *thraaack, thraaack, thraaack.*

A giantess appeared, stomping through the underbrush.

Price bolted, a blur of seersucker. The giantess was faster. In one quick whoosh of her sword she had sliced through his knees. In a dozen more chops she had dismembered Roland T. Price. Blood sopped the pine needles.

The image of the forest faded for a second, then returned to full presence. The tree bark and the edges of the leaves seemed to struggle to hold their definition. I imagined Price's financial empire imploding and wondered if I should retreat.

The giantess turned from her savage work to face me. She wore a leather loincloth that did little to conceal her rippling musculature. A chain mail halter held her large, rolling breasts aloft.

"You'd best finish him off," she said in a familiar voice. I studied her face — the gently rounded nose, the delicately sweeping eyebrows, the long black ringlets of hair. Iris.

I glanced at the carnage.

"How many pieces do you have to chop a guy into?" I asked.

"He appeared to you in vampire form, no? You'd best treat him accordingly — and be quick about it."

Iris was correct. Price's body parts were writhing about the forest floor. The torso already had reassembled itself and was sidling up to the left arm for reattachment.

I ran along the path of ruined forest until I found a suitably splintered stump. With a kick I freed a yard-long piece of pointed timber. Then I returned to the struggling torso of Roland T. Price and rammed the stake

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through its heart.

The forest vanished, and a corporate-looking meeting room materialized around me. There were five uniformed police officers in the room. A hospital attendant was strapping me to a gurney. Several chairs were overturned, and what appeared to have been a crystal water pitcher had been smashed against the far wall.

Roland T. Price was propped in one corner, his dead eyes staring at me. A piece of broken chair leg protruded from his chest.

Angus Doggler was talking to one of the cops, bobbing that balding little head against his bow tie. "Mr. Price was here for some, uh, financial negotiations," Doggler was saying. "We had just taken our seats when this maniac burst in and attacked him."

"And you've never seen him before — the suspect, I mean?" the policeman asked.

"His face looks familiar," Doggler said. "Maybe a writer from way back. He must have been following Price — that's all I can think of."

The attendant rolled me into the hall. Iris was there, feigning shock over the murder, I guessed. Still wearing that prim little blouse and corduroy suit. Her hair had been cut short to hide the dragon damage.

"I liked you better with big tits," I told her.

"Sorry about that, ma'am," said the attendant, rolling me toward the elevator. "Where he escaped from, he don't see many female types."

"You'd best show some respect," Iris said as I wheeled by. "Next time, a copy editor might not pull your chestnuts out of the fire."

The elevator doors closed.

"*Doesn't*," I said to the attendant. "Where he escaped from, he *doesn't* see many females."

"Writers," the attendant said derisively. He wouldn't look at me — stared at the numbered lights counting down.

"Copy editors," I replied.

The chime rang as we hit the lobby.

"You wouldn't mind dropping me in Key West, would you?" I asked the attendant.

"Maybe next time, pal."

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Steve Perry is mostly a novelist these days, although he occasionally gets what he calls "wild hair stories" — short story ideas that must be written or else. We were lucky enough to grab a previous wild hair story, "The Master of Chan Gen," and publish it in our September, 1992 issue.

Of this story, Steve writes, "One afternoon while trying rather ineptly to play my old guitar, a vague idea for 'Other Toys' popped into my head. Naturally, as it seems with all the short fiction I've done in the last ten years, I was up against a book deadline and had no time to write it. Less than no time, since I was behind on my schedule. I filed the somewhat muzzy idea away, not expecting to get back to it for a couple of months at the earliest.

"Two days later at midnight, while I was out walking my dog, the story dropped out of the clear and cold sky on me all of a piece.

"Some things in this biz you can't ignore."

Other Toys

By Steve Perry

THE FEAR SITS IN MY BELLY like a lump of rock from the bottom of the sea, cold, icy, indigestible, stretching my bowel, weighing me down. Worse than pain, worse than death, worse than anything — the thought that God has forsaken me clutches at me with claws so sharp they pierce to my very soul, causing my essence to spew forth like a fount of spiritual blood.

God has forsaken me. I am doomed.

Doomed.

What could I have done? What vile act could be worth this, this the ultimate curse? Surely I am a sinner, never have I claimed otherwise, but surely my crimes have been in the doing of small sins, never drawing near the murky swamp of heresy, never veering from True Devotion, nary a misstep from The Path. This I can attest to, this I can affirm, for in my heart I know. I am not — *never* — have I felt moved to the slightest apostasy; always have I kept the Faith, always, by my life...and yet —

And yet, God no longer answers my prayers. I am abandoned and the

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thought of never feeling His light upon my worthless self again tears asunder my being. Please, my Lord, forgive me for my errors! In Your infinite mercy, pity me, for I do not know what I have done to deserve this, the worst of all punishments.

Please!

If he hadn't been on vacation, John Cartas would never have noticed the piece. The article in the paper was short, a filler, really, buried in the back pages under the ad for tires and the new woman sportswriter's column. In what the city editor called the "Science Section," trying to keep a straight face while he said it. No byline. They either pulled it off the wire or had one of the drones hack it out:

> ANNA-BY-THE-SEA — A team of visiting paleontologists from the University of Arizona have made what one representative terms "an amazing discovery" in a cave near the town of Anna-by-the-Sea.
>
> According to Professor Peter Lipton, head of the team, the searchers have uncovered the remains of a new and unique dinosaur.
>
> "It appears to be the entire skeleton," Lipton said, "we've never seen anything quite like it before."
>
> Lipton's team hopes to complete the excavation of the dinosaur before winter sets in.

If he'd been on the beat, dealing with the scum of the city, he would have been too busy writing the news to read it. He was a good reporter, if getting long in the tooth at forty-five to still be on the cop shop; still, good reporter or not, he got most of his news when he was working from the tube. Dan Rather. Peter Jennings. Even Tom Brokaw, when the cable sometimes went out and he had to tune the damned set manually.

Cartas leaned back in the rickety cane-bottomed chair that had belonged to his grandmother. The wood was old, the screws had pulled halfway out on one side, the caning was stretched by too many fat asses over too many years. He reached for the cup of coffee and sipped at it, but it had gone cold, the cream giving it a sickly and almost rancid paleness. He put the cup down and looked

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at the piece again. It didn't mean anything, didn't mean anything at all. He was on vacation. He was forty-five, bald, thirty-five pounds overweight and sitting alone in his matchbox of a kitchen in his rented house, drinking too much coffee. Who would have ever thought it would be like this? He'd had such big plans, once upon a time. A long time ago. It had gone south somewhere along the way, one day he'd looked up and half his life was over. He'd lost it somewhere and damned if he knew where. Or when.

So, some scientists found some bones, big fucking deal. It didn't matter.

Peter Lipton wished he had a gun. Better, one of his more Neanderthal football-playing students with a *machine* gun, standing outside the cave, ready to blast anybody who got too close.

"Professor?"

Lipton pulled himself away from the fantasy. Might as well wish for the royalties to Jean Auel's next novel, while he was at it. He looked at the speaker, his post-doc assistant, a long-haired boy of twenty-six who bore the rather absurd name of "Ocean Cummings." Most of the time he went by O.C. His parents had apparently been hippies in the sixties and inflicted much upon him as a result of their rather solipsistic new age cant. Some of it must have stuck, for he wore his hair in a long braid that nearly reached to the middle of his upper back.

"We've found another one," O.C. said.

He held his hands out as might a man offering gifts to a king.

Lipton had seen sixty-eight of the things by now, they had that many whole ones, plus fragments of maybe fifty others, but each time seemed like a miracle. It was greenish, almost a jade color, veined with dark red twisted lines just below the surface. This particular specimen was the size of a saucer, roundish but irregularly so, perhaps the thickness of a fifty-cent piece and slightly curved.

"You have it tagged and located?"

"Sure, Doc. You think being in a cave has made me stupid?"

Lipton smiled politely.

"Uh, one other thing, Dr. Lipton. I dunno if I ought to even say anything about it, it's only a rumor, something I picked off the computer net when I was online last night."

"Go on."

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"Well. Noel, out in Montana, I get the impression he's planning on heading this way."

Lipton felt his stomach lurch. As a boy in New Orleans, he had spent more than a few happy hours at Lake Ponchartrain, back when the Zephyr was still the scariest roller coaster in the country. He'd never enjoyed that ride, though teenage bravado made him climb on it every time he went to the park. His stomach felt now as it always had right after that first big drop on the Zephyr. Noel!

"I will personally box the man's ears if he shows up," Lipton said. He meant it, too.

O.C. laughed. "Hey, we were here first. When you get your paper done on this, Noel will be begging to polish your shoes."

Lipton's smile was larger this time. Now there was a pleasant thought indeed.

I must be in error; I am mistaken. Surely it is so. God is busy, He has so much to do, it is selfish of me to think that I among all His creations deserve His presence more than another. He has not forgotten me, rather He has winds to direct and stars to place in the Heavens, myriad chores I cannot begin with my limited, small mind to understand. How dare I hope to fathom the mind of God?

This is surely a test, a simple one of my Faith, and All Knowing as He is, God has seen that in my fear I had begun to fail. I allowed my fear to create doubt and down that path lay reason for my panic. But no more. I shall abide, I will stand fast. My life will go on as it normally would, I shall do those things for which I am designed: I shall eat and sleep and pray and maintain my purity and upon me God will smile once again, once He sees my love is true. He cannot have deserted me, his most faithful of servants. It is beyond belief.

Cartas called the desk and got Kohler, who was stuck on rewrite.

"Kohler."

"Hey, dickhead."

"Well, well, John-boy. What are you doing calling in? I thought you were on vacation."

"I am, but I need you to look up something for me."

"What — is there a sign on me that says 'lackey?'"

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"Come on, Kohler, deadline is passed and you don't have jackshit to do."

"All right. What?"

"We ran a short piece in the Sport-Science section this morning, about some scientists out at Anna-by-the-Sea."

"Hold on."

Cartas heard the sound of the keyboard clicking as Kohler called up the file.

"Yeah, I got it. So?"

"Is that the whole piece or is there more?"

"Looks like the whole pyramid, Jackie, baby."

"Nothing on the log?"

"Oh, yeah, right, we've sent four guys and a camerawoman out to do a layout for the Sunday mag. Buncha diggers from the U of Geek rummaging around in fossils, hey, that'll blow Thanksgiving right outta the paper."

"Your sarcasm needs work, Kohler."

"You'd know, you're the expert."

Kohler cut the connection and Cartas cradled the phone and stared at it.

He sat there for a long time before he sighed and shook his head.

Fuck it. What else could he do?

IT IS NOT right! It cannot be fair! I have been faithful, I have obeyed His every command, His every whim and my reward for selfless devotion is that I be tossed aside? To be shrugged off as one without value? To be of no more concern than the scat of a recent meal?

No! Damn Him! I will have have it! I will turn my face away from Him! If he ever returns I will spit on Him! I will hurl my defiance at Him and no matter what He does, I will not repent!

How dare he abandon me? This is not how the world should work, it cannot be so if there is any justice under the heavens!

No God of mercy could behave this way!

Damn Him!

Damn Him!

"We've got the measurements on the skull, Doc. Looking at two meters, three, from snout to the base."

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The air in the cave was damp and smelled of seaweed and salt spray; the late autumn winds had freshened and, coming off the water, they drove into the hollow sometimes with a force to make the crags and crannies howl. Like blowing across the mouth of a Coke bottle, Lipton thought.

There were only five students in the cave now. It was late, and while the lamps on their stands kept the darkness well at bay, the night's cold touched them with bolder fingers.

Lipton walked over to where the half-excavated skull lay. The bone was nearly clean where it was exposed. Even though the remains had not been there very long, the damp air and rot had done their work, and small scavengers had taken their share of the thing's flesh.

It seemed to Lipton that the beast wore an Archaic Smile, and he said as much to O.C., who stood aiming the laser tape at the skull.

"Archaic Smile?"

"The term for the expression on the faces of many Greek statues from the Archaic period," Lipton said. "From around 750-500 B.C. Some schools of thought have it that the smile resulted from the Greeks' belief that the expression reflected perfect health; others believe that the smile simply represented a certain amount of technical difficulty in carving a curved mouth around a rather block-like head, which was all the rage at the time."

O.C. nodded. "Interesting."

"Our friend here seems to be wearing an almost Mona Lisa-like smirk."

"Yeah, it does kinda look like that. Wonder what he was thinking about?"

"That we'll never know. But when the world finds out what we have here, we'll have reason for plenty of smiles of our own."

Truly, Lipton thought, as O.C. continued his measurements. While every reptile was unique, more or less by definition, no one had ever seen a creature like this before. And it had not lain moldering here for tens of millions of years, either. This was his coelacanth; this was going to set the scientific world on its ear! His career, steady but undistinguished, was made. His students' careers were made. He was at the scene of the biggest find in history and no one would ever be able to take that away from him! Not even the despicable Noel.

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I am going to die. I cannot eat, I cannot sleep, I cannot stir myself even to defecate. I lie in pools of filth, waiting for the end. Forgive me, dear Lord, for my blasphemy. I was weak, I know, I found anger where there should never have been any. I deserve this state. I deserve to die for having raised my voice against You. I ask that You consider my pain as an excuse — not really a justifiable excuse, I know, but all my withered mind can offer. When you have frolicked with God, to be left alone is a wound from which you cannot easily recover. It made me mad, there can be no other answer. In my grief and pain and fear, I cried out, and thus condemned myself.

You know this. Of course You know, You who are All Things.

I ask for Your forgiveness even as I am cast down into the depths of The Pit.

I was unworthy of Your love; I failed You, and I will spend Eternity in sorrow and regret for my weakness. Forgive me...

Cartas found the cave. The stink of seaweed permeated the air, and it was getting really cold. The wind cut at him, found the openings in his worn leather jacket, polished his bare head as it passed. Fog was forming and rolling in.

He felt the sense of dread he'd been expecting but he pushed on. He saw the lights from inside, a couple of kids leaving, carrying plastic coolers and green plastic trash bags as they left. They were laughing, enjoying themselves, full of life and youth. He couldn't remember feeling that way.

Cartas moved closer, picking his way across the rocky shoreline. The tide was in and the path was narrow. He slipped a couple of times on the slimy rocks, nearly fell, but managed to keep to his feet. By the time he'd gone up the slight incline to reach the cave's mouth, he was cold and out of breath. Twenty years ago he could have made it without breathing hard. Fifteen years before that he would have danced across the treacherous rocks at a run and never worried about falling. Nor would he have fallen.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

A tall, thin, ruddy man with salt and pepper hair, dressed in a windbreaker over a T-shirt and blue jeans stood there, staring at him.

"I'm Jack Cartas," he said, finally getting his wind back. "I'm a reporter — "

"Out, out!" the man said, shooing at him as though he were some kind

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of small pest. "We aren't ready for the media, this entire area is off-limits!"

A second man, much younger, wearing braids and a questioning look, came up from the depression behind the older man.

"Are you Professor Lipton?"

"Yes, I am, but you'll have to leave. You have no right to be here."

Cartas nodded. "Boy, that's true. But I have to take a look at him before I leave."

"Impossible. The site cannot be disturbed!"

But Cartas had come too far to turn away now. He knew he shouldn't have made the trip, it wouldn't solve anything, wouldn't make anything any better. He started up the incline, smiling vaguely at the professor, so as not to seem menacing.

"Stop! You'll step on something!"

Sure enough, he did, not two seconds later. He stopped, bent, picked it up. Held it up and stared at it.

"Put that down!" The Professor seemed as if he might have a stroke. "You have no idea what you are fooling with!"

"That's where you're wrong," Cartas said. He waved the mostly-flat but slightly curved greenish plate. "This is a scale. It came off your dinosaur, there in the pit behind you, right? Thirty-seven years ago, I'd guess."

Cartas moved up the slope. When Lipton moved in front of him, he put out one hand and moved the man aside. He reached the edge of the shallow depression and stopped. Stared down into it. Shook his head.

"Ah, Jesus. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I — I didn't know. I was just a fucking kid. Forgive me."

He turned around and looked at the two men. The younger one's face wore a shocked expression, his eyes wide. He knew.

Too late, Cartas thought. For you. For me. Too late. It had all started to go downhill then, he knew that now. One day thirty-seven years ago. No going back now. Shit.

He walked out past the two scientists. He did not look back as he left. Old, tired, used up, worn out.

Lost.

"Oh, man," O.C. said. He shook his head as the fat and bald little man left the cave.

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"He took one of the scales," Lipton said. "We'll have to call the local authorities, the police."

"Well, he's got a right, if he wants it."

"Excuse me?"

"Jesus, Dr. Lipton, don't you know who that was? What this thing is we've found here? Oh, man."

Lipton stared at his assistant. "What are you talking about?"

"He's been here before," O.C. said. "Haven't you heard the song? Christ, my parents were old hippies, I grew up listening to it from the time I was a baby."

"Song?"

"And his name, he told you what it was, didn't he?"

"He said it was 'Cartas,' that would be Italian, I believe."

"Yeah. 'Jack Cartas.' Cartas is Italian. It means 'papers.'"

"So?"

"Jack Cartas. What might you call an eight-year-old version of him? Jackie?"

Despite his general myopia outside academia, Lipton was not stupid. "It can't be," he said. But his voice was not much above a whisper and the little boy inside him who used to ride the Zephyr knew beyond any doubt that it was so. Jackie Papers.

And that same little boy in Lipton also knew what the scientist would still try to deny:

That wasn't a dinosaur behind him at all.

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Kelley Eskridge's short fiction has appeared in Pulphouse: The Hardback Magazine, Little Deaths, *and* Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine. *Last year, she won a writing grant from the Astraea Foundation in New York.*

About "Strings," she writes, "I wrote 'Strings' after seeing a television interview with a violin soloist named Nadia Sonneberg, who plays as if her whole self were the instrument. She doesn't give a damn if she stands crooked or makes funny faces or cries while she's doing it. It was wonderful to see a performer care more about her music than about someone else's idea of how she ought to look when she plays it."

"Strings" marks Kelley's first appearance in F&SF.

Strings

By Kelley Eskridge

SHE TOOK THE stage, head shaking. Her jaw and the tiny muscles in her neck rippled in sharp adrenaline tremors. She moved her head slowly back and forth while she walked the twenty yards from stage right to the spotlight; it was always the same, this swooping scan, taking in the waiting orchestra, the racks of lights overhead, the audience rumbling and rustling. She moved her head not so much to hide the shaking as to vent it: to hold it until center stage and the white-light circle where she could raise the violin, draw it snug against the pad on her neck; and at the moment of connection she looked at the Conductor and smiled, and by the time he gathered the orchestra into the waiting breath of the upraised baton, she had become the music once again.

After the final bows, she stood behind the narrow curtain at the side of the

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stage and watched the audience eddy up the aisles to the lobby and the street and home. She could tell by their gentle noise that the current of the music carried them for these moments as it had carried her for most of her life.

Nausea and exhaustion thrust into her like the roll of sticks on the kettledrum. And something else, although she did not want to acknowledge it: the thinnest whine of a string, phantom music high and wild in a distant, deep place within her head.

"Excuse me, Strad?"

She jerked, and turned. The orchestra's First Clarinet stood behind her, a little too close.

"I'm sorry." He reached out and almost touched her. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"No. No, it's O.K." She felt the tension in her smile. "Was there something you wanted?" Her right hand rubbed the muscles of her left in an old and practiced motion.

"Oh. Yes. The party has started; we were all wondering.... You are coming to the party, aren't you?"

She smiled again, squared her shoulders. She did not know if she could face it: the percussion of too many people, too much food, the interminable awkward toasts they would make to the Stradivarius and the Conservatory. She had seen a Monitor in the house tonight, and she knew he would be at the party, too, with a voice-activated computer in his hands; they would be soft, not musician's hands. She wondered briefly how big her file was by now. She wanted desperately to go back to the hotel and sleep.

"Of course," she said. "Please go back and tell them I'll be there just as soon as I've changed." Then she found her dressing room and began, unsteadily, to strip the evening from herself.

She was tense and tired the next morning as she packed her music and violin and clothes. Her next guest solo was with an orchestra in a city she had not visited for several years. A Conservatory limo picked her up at the airport along with the current Guarnerius, who handed his cello into the backseat as if it were an aging grande dame rather than hardwood and almost half his weight. He was assigned to the same orchestra, but for only two weeks. She was glad she would have a week alone with the musicians after he left. She did not like him.

He chattered at her all the way to the hotel, mistaking her silence for at-

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tention. She tried to listen, to allow him to bore her or anger her, to distract her. But she could not hook her attention onto him: it slid away like the rain down the windshield of the car, dropped into the steady beat of the tires on the wet road, *thud-DUH thud-DUH,* the rhythm so familiar and comforting that she relaxed into it unguardedly and was caught and jerked into the welter of other sound that was also the car and the road and the journey: *thwump thwump* of the wipers, the alto ringing of the engine, the coloratura squeak of the seat springs as Guarnerius leaned forward to make an earnest point, the counterpoint of the wheels of the cars around them, *thudduh thudduh THUMPthump-thump THUD-duh* — and no matter how hard she tried, she could not make it something she recognized; she had no music for it. No Bach, no Paganini, no Mozart or Lalo or Vivaldi would fit around the texture of the throbbing in her bones — and she was suddenly sure that if her heart were not pounding so loud, she would hear that distant wailing music in her head; it would wind around her like a woman dancing: sinuous, sweating, lightly swaying, wrapping her up —

She jerked. The edge of Guarnerius's briefcase pressed against her arm. She remembered G did not like to touch other people or be touched by them. She wondered if he chose to play the cello so he would never have to sit next to another passenger on an airplane. She wondered if he had ever heard phantom music.

"... *waiting,* Strad." The cold rim of the briefcase pushed at her arm.

She blinked, looked up at him.

"We're here, for God's sake. The whole orchestra is probably on pins and needles, poor idiots, waiting in there for the Strad and Guarnerius to arrive, and here you sit gaping off into the middle distance. Or were you planning to ask them to rehearse in the car?"

She could feel herself flush. "No," she said shortly, definitely, as if it would answer everything, and stepped out.

She never made friends easily. There were a thousand reasons: she was too shy; she was the Strad, and other people were shy of her; she was busy. Sometimes she thought she was too lonely to make friends, as if the solitude and separateness were so much a part of her that she did not know how to replace them with anything else. So it was simply another sign of how upside down things were that she found a heart-friend in the first two days of rehearsals with the new orchestra. They might have been friends the first day, if he had been there.

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"I'm very sorry, Stradivarius," the Stage Manager said. She was a thickset woman with a clipboard and a pinch-eyed look. She was also, Strad thought, worried and not hiding it as well as she wished.

"I'm very sorry," the SM began again. "I'm afraid we can't rehearse the Viotti this afternoon as planned."

Strad rubbed her left hand with her right. She wished for one improbable moment that the SM would give her an excuse to fly into a rage so that she could howl out all her fear and tension safely disguised as artist's pique. But she could not: all other considerations aside, it reminded her too much of something G might do.

She sighed. "What seems to be the problem? My schedule requests were quite clear."

"Yes, Stradivarius. But our Piano isn't here."

"Then get someone over to the nearest bar or videohouse or wherever she or he . . . he? . . . wherever he is and bring him along."

"It's not like that. He. . . ." The SM swallowed. "He's at a Conservatory disciplinary hearing. We're not sure if he's coming back or not . . . but we don't want to replace him until we're sure, because it's not *fair*." She stopped, gripped the clipboard tighter against her breasts. "I beg your pardon," she said formally. "I did not intend to question the decisions of the Conservatory. The entire orchestra apologizes for the inconvenience caused by one of our members."

"Oh, put a sock in it," Strad said, surprising them both. "What's he done?"

"He's been accused of improvising."

He was back the next day. Strad knew it the moment she walked into the hall for the morning rehearsal. The room seemed brighter, as if there were more light and air in it than the day before.

She saw him in the midst of a crowd of players, like a young sapling in the sun. From habit, she noticed his hands first. They were thin and strong-looking, with long, square-tipped fingers; expressive hands. *Good,* she thought, and looked next at his face.

He's so young. His eyes and mouth moved with the same emotion as his hands, but none of the control. Someone touched his shoulder, and as he turned, laughing, he saw Strad watching him. His eyes widened, the laugh turned into a beautiful smile; then, quite suddenly, he looked away. It jolted her, as if a string had broken in mid-note.

She felt movement behind her. Guarnerius appeared at her left shoulder, with the Conductor in tow.

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"Is that him?"

"Yes, Guarnerius."

"What did the disciplinary committee decide to do about him?"

"He's on probation. He's been warned." The Conductor shrugged. "I couldn't prove anything, you see; it was just a matter of a few notes. They really couldn't do anything except cite him for faulty technique." The Conductor sounded unconcerned; Strad thought committee hearings were probably all in a day's work for her. No wonder the orchestra was tense. No wonder their Piano was playing forbidden notes. She could imagine herself in his place, young and impatient, aching to prove she was better than the music she was given to play, knowing that one note added here or there would support the piece and give it more resonance, wanting to hear how it might sound. . . . And then she did hear.

It started slow and soft, the music in her head. It swirled through her skull like a thread of heavy cream in hot coffee. It seeped down her spine. *I mustn't move,* Strad thought, *if I can just not move, it won't know I'm here, and it will go back wherever it came from.* The almost-audible music bubbled in her bones. *Go find somebody else to play with!* she thought wildly. Then she looked again at the Piano, and knew it had.

"How soon can you find someone else?" Guarnerius's voice grated against the music. For a confused moment, she wondered if he were talking about her, and a huge, voiceless *no* swelled inside her.

"I have no grounds to replace him," the Conductor said.

G shrugged. "Contract privilege. If Strad and I find him unacceptable, you're obligated to provide a substitute."

"There isn't going to be anyone as good. . . ."

"There isn't going to be any substitute," Strad interrupted.

"What are you talking about?" Guarnerius looked sharply into her eyes, but she knew the Conductor was looking at her shaking hands.

"He was warned, G, not expelled."

"He was improvising."

"The Conservatory apparently doesn't have reason to think so. Besides, what's the point of upsetting everyone again? We've already missed a day's rehearsal, and your Strauss is difficult enough without having the orchestra tense and angry and playing badly."

Guarnerius frowned. Strad turned back to the Conductor, who was managing to look attentive and unobtrusive all at once. Strad could feel her

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hands still trembling slightly. She folded them carefully in front of her, knowing the Conductor saw.

"Perhaps you'll be kind enough to gather the players?"

"Perhaps you'd like a moment to yourself before rehearsal?" The other woman's voice was carefully neutral. Strad wanted to break something over her lowered head.

"No, I would not," she said, very precisely. "What I would like is a few moments with my music and a full orchestra, if that can be arranged sometime before opening night."

The Conductor flushed. "My apologies, Stradivarius."

"Well, let's get on with it," G said crossly.

She did not get to speak with the Piano until the next day. She sat on the loading dock at the back of the hall during the midday break, enjoying the sun and the solitude. She was far enough from the street that no mechanical noises reached her: she heard only the creak of the metal loading door in the breeze, the muffled, brassy warble of trumpet scales, the hissing wind in the tall grass of the empty lot behind the building. The sun was warm and red on her closed eyelids. A cricket began to fiddle close by.

"I thought you might like some tea."

The cricket stopped in mid-phrase. She felt suddenly angry at the endless stream of infuriating and intrusive courtesies that were offered to the Strad. Nevertheless she smiled in the general direction of the voice. "You're very kind," she said. She kept her eyes closed and hoped whoever it was would put down the tea and go away.

"Well, no, I'm not. I just didn't know how else to get to talk to you."

"I'm available to any musician. It's part of being the Strad; everyone knows that. Please don't feel shy."

"I'm not shy. I just thought you might not want to be seen talking to me, considering everything."

Strad opened her eyes and sat up straight. "Oh. It's you. I didn't realize. . . ." He stepped back. "No, please don't go," she said quickly, and put one hand out. "Please. I'd like to talk to you." He came back slowly, tall, dark, close-cropped hair, those beautiful hands. He held two mugs that steamed almost imperceptibly.

"Sit down."

He handed her a cup and sat next to her on the edge of the loading dock, curling into a half-lotus, tea cradled in his lap. She took a sip and tasted hot cinnamon, orange, bright spices.

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"Can I talk to you?" he said.

"Of course. I just told you. . . ."

"No," he said quietly. "Can I talk to you?"

The rich yellow taste of the tea seeped through her. She felt transparent and warm, caught between the sun and the tea and the young man who wore his music like skin.

"Yes. You can talk to me."

He let out a long breath. Everything was still for a moment. The cricket began to play again.

"It was awful at the disciplinary committee," he said, as abruptly and comfortably as if they had known each other for years. "They would have dismissed me if they could. There was an old man with long gray hair who made me take the phrase note by note to prove that I knew how to play it. He wanted me to repeat what I had done during the rehearsal that made the Conductor charge me."

"Boethius." Strad nodded. The Piano looked at her. "He's the Master Librarian," she explained. His eyes widened and then closed for a moment.

"I suppose he does all the notation of the scores as well."

"Mmm," Strad agreed. "He doesn't like having his toes stepped on."

"Well, at least now I know why he . . . he really scared me. I'll never be able to play that piece again without freezing up at that movement." He grinned at her. "Don't say it: I know I'm lucky to even be able to think about playing the piece again at all." His smile faded. He took a gulp of tea, swallowed, studied the inside of the cup. Strad stayed still, watching him.

He looked up after a while, up and beyond her into the empty field.

"I never improvised half as much in the music as I did in that room." He was silent for a moment, remembering. His fingers twitched.

"You know I did it, don't you." It was not a question.

She nodded.

"Thought so. Some of my friends in there —" he looked at the hall —"don't believe I could have done it. They wouldn't understand. They just . . . they play what they're told, and they seem happy, but that's not music. It's *not*," he said again, defiantly. His cheeks were red, and his voice shook. "So how can they be happy?" He swallowed, took a deep breath. "Maybe they aren't. Maybe they're just making do the best they can. I can almost understand that now, you know, after the hearing. . . . I wish that cricket would just shut up." He picked up a piece of gravel from the edge of the

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dock and threw it out into the field. The cricket fiddling stopped.

"What's it like, being an Instrument?"

"It's good." She saw, in a blur, all her Competitions, all her challengers. "It's hard. It can be amazing. The Conservatory orchestra is wonderful." She set down her cup. "You're thinking of the Competition? Of challenging the Steinway?"

He bit his lip. "I've thought about it. Maybe we all do. . . ." He sighed. "I know if I ever want to be the Steinway I'll have to . . . I'll stop improvising. But Strad, I don't know how to stop the music in my head."

She felt herself go very still. She had made no sound, but he looked up and out of himself and saw her. "Oh," he said gently, hopefully, sadly. "You, too?"

She found the muscles that moved her mouth. "I don't know what. . . ." . . . *you're talking about,* she meant to say, and have it finished. But she could not. She had a sudden, clear image of how he must have looked in the disciplinary hearing: a new suit, an old shirt, his breath sour with anxiety, and his mouth suddenly not very good with words. He would have appreciated the piano they had him use, she knew; it was undoubtedly the finest instrument he had ever played. She thought of him carefully wiping the fear-sweat from his hands before he touched it, of him playing it and denying the music he heard lurking within its strings. It broke her heart.

"I don't know what to do," she said, and behind her the cricket began to play again.

THAT NIGHT she dreamed of her first competition. She stood with the other challengers backstage while a crowd of people with no faces settled into the arena seats. She played in her dream as she had in the real moment, with the passion that the music demanded and the precision that the Judges required of a Strad, as if the piece were a new, wondrous discovery, and at the same time as if she had played it a hundred thousand times before. She forgot the audience was there, until they began to clap and then to shout, and she could not see them clearly because she was weeping.

Then the audience disappeared, and the building vanished into a landscape of sand under a sand-colored sky. Directly ahead of her, a door stood slightly ajar in its frame. She heard her violin crying. She stumbled

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forward into dark. The violin screamed on and on as she searched for it. She found it eventually, high on a shelf over the door. It went silent when she touched it. She pulled it down and hugged it to her, and fell on her knees out onto the sand.

She looked at the violin anxiously, turning it over, running her fingers across the bridge and the strings. She could not see any damage.

Suddenly a voice spoke from the darkness inside the open door. "It only looks the same," the voice hissed, and the door slammed shut inches from her face at the same time that the violin stood itself on end and burst into song. And then she awoke, clutching a pillow to her side and sweating in the cool air of her hotel suite.

She lay still for a few moments, then got up and went into the bathroom, filled the tub full of water so hot that she had to lower herself into it an inch at a time.

She closed her eyes as the water cooled around her neck and knees; she remembered the music that had burst from her violin at the end of her dream. She recognized it: the distant, maddening music that she had heard earlier; the haunting melody that stirred her hands to shape it; the illegal music that she could never play.

When she tried to stand up, her hand slipped on the porcelain rim, and her elbow cracked against it. The pain drove the music from her head, and she was grateful.

"Let's have a picnic," the Piano said a few days later, at the end of an afternoon's rehearsal, the rich, rolling energy of good music still in the air. There was a moment of quiet, as if everyone were trying to work out what picnics had to do with concert performances. Then the SM set down the pile of scores she was carrying with a solid paperish thunk.

"That's a great idea," she said. Behind her, Guarnerius rolled his eyes and went back to packing up his cello.

The SM produced a clipboard and a pen. "Who wants to bring what?" She was surrounded by a crowd of jabbering voices and waving hands. It took a few minutes for the group to thin out enough to let Strad get close.

The SM looked up at her, obviously surprised. "Was there something you wanted, Strad?"

"I'd like to bring something, but you'll have to tell me what we need."

"Oh no, we'll take care of it, Strad. There's no need to trouble yourself."

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"I'd like to." But the SM had already turned away. *Damn it,* Strad thought. She gathered up her violin and left the hall, walking alone through the double doors into the sun and smell of the street.

The limo waited alongside the curb. The driver got out and moved around the car to take her things. She gave him her violin and music, but shook her head when he opened the rear door for her.

"I'll walk. Guarnerius is still packing up; I don't know how long he'll be. Wait for me outside the hotel, and I'll pick up my things. Don't give them to anyone but me."

"Yes, Stradivarius," the driver answered. He looked down at the ground while she talked, so she could not tell if he minded being told what to do. *Damn,* she thought again.

She walked fast the first few blocks. Then she realized that no one recognized her, that no one was paying her any more than casual attention, and gradually she felt safe enough to slow down. She was sweating lightly, and she stopped under a canvas awning in front of a shop to catch her breath. She pressed herself against the cool concrete of the building, out of the way of people moving along the sidewalk, and watched the world go by.

A man stood at a bus stop, absorbed in *Wuthering Heights,* humming Brahms. A couple passed her with a transistor radio, Vivaldi trickling fuzzily from the speaker. A pack of little boys on bicycles pedaled down the street, bellowing the *1812 Overture,* booming out the cannon with gleeful satisfaction. *My audience,* Strad realized with wonder. She thought of all the musicians, all the hours and the work for a few minutes of song that lived and died from one note to the next. *But they hear. They hear.*

She stepped out from the shadow and wandered up the sidewalk. It was as though the whole world had opened up since she had talked to the Piano, since she had told someone how it was with her. She saw things she had not seen in a long time: dirt, children's toys, hot food ready to eat out of paper containers, narrow alleyways and the open back doors of restaurants where people in grubby aprons stood fanning themselves and laughing. And everywhere music, the works of the masters, clear and rich and beautiful, the only music; the sounds and feelings that had shaped and contained her life since she was young; as young as the child who stumbled on the pavement in front of her. Strad stopped and offered her hand, but the little girl picked herself up with a snort and ran on down the street.

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Strad smiled. As she craned her neck to watch the child run, she saw a smear of bright color beside her. She turned and found herself in front of a window full of lines and whorls and grinning fantastical faces that resolved into dozens of kites, all shapes and sizes and shades of colors. "Oh," she breathed, catching her hands up to her ribs.

"Everybody does that," someone said, and chuckled. She saw a woman standing in the open door of the shop. Bits of dried glue and gold glitter and colored paper were stuck to her arms and clothes.

"They're beautiful," Strad said.

"Come in and have a closer look."

She left the shop with a kite bundled under her arm, light but awkward. She walked slowly; the hotel was only a few minutes away, and she wished she had farther to go so that she could enjoy herself longer.

She passed a woman who smiled and then wrinkled her eyebrows and gave Strad an odd look. It was only then that she realized that, like so many others, she was humming as she walked. But the music that buzzed in her mouth was the alien music that she had thought was safely locked in her head. She knew the other woman had heard it; then she began to wonder who else might have heard, and she spun in a circle on the sidewalk, trying to look in all directions at once for someone with a hand-held recorder or a wallet with a Monitor's badge. She was sweating again. Suddenly the hotel seemed much too far away. She wished for some sunglasses or a hat or the cool of the Conservatory limousine. The music lapped against the back of her tongue all the way back to her room.

The kite was an enormous success. Most of the players wanted a turn, although G and the Conductor made a point of turning up their noses when offered. The kite had a large group that leaped and shouted under it as it bobbed along in the clear sky over the park.

The Piano had brought his wife. "You're someone famous, aren't you?" she said to Strad when they were introduced. The Piano poked her sharply in the ribs. "Stop it, hon," she said calmly, and went on shaking Strad's hand. "Not everybody knows music, as I keep trying to point out to the whiz kid here. Everyone says you're very good. Did you really tell the SM to put a sock in it?" She was a tall, loose-boned woman with deep-set brown eyes. Strad liked her.

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They sat on the grass and talked while the Piano joined the group running with the kite. His wife smiled as she watched him. "He was so excited about meeting you. He needs friends who understand his work. I guess you do, too."

"Yes," Strad agreed. "What do you do?" she asked, suddenly very curious.

"I teach literature to fifth graders. They all wanted to come with me today. I told them it was my turn for a field trip."

Words and music, Strad thought. What a household they must have together.

"What are you thinking?"

"I was just envying you," Strad said.

Later, after the others had worn themselves out, the three of them took the kite to the edge of the park green for one last flight.

"I know what it reminds me of," the Piano's wife said. "With those deep colors and the tail swirling. It looks like something the Gypsies would have had, something that I read to my kids about. They loved to sing and dance. I'll bet it was just like that, all dips and swirls and jumping around. They played violins, too — did you know that?" she added, with a grin for Strad. "I wonder what it sounded like."

I think I know, Strad thought.

"Careful, hon," the Piano said warningly. He jerked his chin toward the other side of the park. A man stood on a slight hill overlooking the common, staring down at the players. He carried a hand-held recorder.

"They don't leave you alone at all, do they?" his wife muttered. "At least I only have to worry about them on the job. Although I hear it's worse if you're a history teacher. . . ." She sighed and began to reel in the kite.

They walked back to the group together, but they found separate places to sit. Strad put the kite away.

WELL, I for one will be extremely glad when this particular tour is over," Guarnerius announced, and put his drink down on Strad's table. Strad wished he would just go away. It was the last night of his engagement with the orchestra, and she was heartily sick of him.

"Where do you go from here?"

"Back to the Conservatory. Time to get ready for the Competition.

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Well, you know that of course." He patted at the wrinkles in his jacket. Alcohol fumes drifted lazily from his mouth. "You should be rehearsing yourself. What's your schedule like?"

"Well, there's next week here, and I've got one more city."

"I don't envy you another week with this miserable orchestra."

"Mmm," she said noncommittally. G's engagement had not gone well, and two clanging wrong notes in his solo that night had not improved his temper.

"Really, Strad. That Conductor is as wooden as her baton, the entire brass section needs a good kick in the rear, and that Piano . . . well, small wonder they had trouble with him, considering the state of the rest of the group." He nodded, took another swallow of his drink, and set the glass down so that it clacked against the wooden table as if helping to make his point.

"I thought the Piano played very well."

"Well, of course he did, Strad, don't be an idiot. He's already screwed up once, and now he's being monitored. Of course he's going to play well."

Monitored. She picked up her glass and leaned back in her chair, let her gaze wander around the room. And there he was, the same Monitor that she had seen at her last orchestra. Had he been the one at the park? Was it normal for the same Monitor to turn up again and again? She had never noticed before. She realized now how much she, like the Piano, had always taken the Monitors for granted. She felt a cramp like someone's fist in her stomach. The sickness brought with it the faint, sweet music inside her skull. The Monitor's head came up like a hunting dog's, as if somehow he had heard it, too. She watched him scan the room, making whispered notes into his recorder, and she saw as if through his eyes: *how scared they all look, how stiff and anxious; see a hand moving too sharply there, a voice raised slightly too high, the smell of hunger for something illegal. . . .* Strad dropped her gaze back down into her glass.

There was something cold and wet against her arm.

". . . your problem lately, Strad?" Guarnerius nudged her again with his glass.

"What?"

"That's exactly what I mean," he said with a smile that was not altogether nice. "You're very preoccupied lately, aren't you, dear?"

She could only stare at him in shock.

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"Oh yes, I've noticed. It hasn't shown up in your music yet, but it will. Bound to. One of these fine days, you'll be up onstage, and your hands will slip on the strings, and then we'll see what it's like when the Strad loses that precious control, that fucking *precision* that everyone's always going on about, oh yes. . . ." The words trailed off. Strad realized for the first time how drunk he was. She remembered that he had made bad mistakes that night, and the Monitor had been there.

Guarnerius stared into his glass as if he wanted to climb in and hide among the ice cubes. Strad stood up and grabbed her violin, music case, coat, bag into a loose, awkward bundle.

"I'm sorry, Strad," she heard him mumble, but she was already moving. She smiled and excused her way across the crowded room without seeing or hearing anything properly until she came to a wall and could go no farther. There was an empty chair by the wall. She dropped her things on the floor next to it and sat down.

The chair made her invisible somehow; at least, no one approached her. The party happened in front of her, like a video. She rubbed her hands, left with right, right with left, watching the groups mingle and break apart and spiral into new forms: the currents matched the music that swelled in gentle waves in her head. And it was too much; she could not fight it any longer. Somewhere inside her a door edged open, and the music trickled through.

She did not know how long she sat before she realized that someone was standing in front of her. She looked up. It was the Piano. She could not speak. He took her arm and pulled her to her feet, tugged her out a side door of the restaurant onto an open patio. He sat her hard into a wrought-iron chair at one of the tables. The metal bit cold and sticky through her light dress. She opened her mouth and took in great heaving bites of air, one after the other, until she felt the door inside her push tightly closed, the music safely behind it.

The Piano sat next to her. She held his hand so hard that the ends of his fingers turned bright red.

"Oh, thank you," she whispered. "How did you know to bring me out here?"

He reached over and brushed a finger against her cheek. It came away wet. "You were crying," he said. "You were sitting in that chair, staring at nothing and crying like the loneliest person on earth, and you weren't

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making a sound. So I brought you outside."

She put her hands up to her face. Her skin felt puffy and hot.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It's so beautiful," she said.

And then: "I'm scared."

The next morning she met some of the players in the hotel to have breakfast and say good-bye. The Piano was there. She kept him in the lobby after the others had left.

"I hate to say good-bye," he said.

"I have something for you," she said. She gave him the kite.

"I'll fly it for you."

She looked at him closely. "You be careful," she said.

"Don't worry."

"I mean it."

"So do I. I'll keep the kite, and every time it flies I'll be thinking of you and the music we both have in us. The trick is to keep it alive somehow. There has to be a way, Strad. There has to be a way to have it and play it and be what we are."

He stood looking at her, and she thought he would say more. But in the end, he only nodded and kissed her gently on the cheek.

She went to her next city, to the rehearsals and dinners and performances and parties, and then back to the Conservatory, to the soundproofed suite of rooms and the tiny private garden that were hers for as long as she was the Stradivarius. She rested, ate, played with the other musicians, all the Instruments gathered together to face their yearly challengers. She rehearsed her Competition piece. One day, Guarnerius asked her, stiltedly, how her last engagement had gone.

"It went fine," she told him. "No problems."

He muttered, "Oh, how nice," and stepped around her, moved stiffly down the hallway toward one of the Conservatory practice rooms. She wondered how he would have reacted if she had told him that she had played as well as ever, and that it had all been empty: hollow, meaningless sound.

It was a relief to put her violin away when she got back to her rooms. There were letters on the desk. There were instructions and announce-

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ments from the Conservatory. There was a note from the Conductor of an orchestra she had guested with once before. There was a package from the Piano.

The note was unsigned: he would know that her mail might be monitored. She did not realize it was from him until she opened the package and saw the kite. She put it slowly on the desk and set the note beside it on the polished wood. She read it again without touching it. A little of the silence inside her gave way to the remembered sound of his voice.

> *I am sending you this as an admirer of your work and your talent. The beauty of this kite reminds me of the music that you carry within you, that you as the Strad keep in trust for us all. Do be careful of the kite; it is not as delicate as it looks. I have been told recently, by those who love me best and who watch me closely, that I can no longer risk flying it myself, as it is too strenuous and dangerous to my health. I will miss it. I would not suggest that you fly it, but it is beautiful to look at.*

She folded the note into a small rectangle and tucked it inside her shirt, against her skin. She thought about the Piano running in the park, whooping and pointing at the kite. Then she went out of her rooms into the garden and pushed a chair into the sun, sat and closed her eyes against the light and let the silence fill her up.

She stayed in her rooms for the next four weeks, rehearsing for the Competition. Her practice was painstaking. She wrung the piece dry. Every note, every phrase, every rest was considered and balanced. Every nuance of tone and meaning was polished until the notes seemed to shine as they shot from the strings.

She felt hollow and open, as wide and empty as a summer sky. She slept without dreaming. She spoke only when necessary. She touched everything gently, as if she had never known texture before.

The night of the Competition, she waited calmly in the wings. The challengers stared at her, or tried not to. She smelled their sweat. One of them, a young woman with pale lion-gold hair, was very good. Strad smiled encouragingly at her when she came offstage, and the young woman smiled back with all the joy of accomplishment, and then blushed desperately.

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The Assistant Stage Manager came to her. "Five minutes, please, Stradivarius," he said, and gave her a little bow and smile that meant *good luck*. She rose and walked to the place that she would enter from. Through the gap in the curtains, she could see the Judges frowning over their evaluations of the challengers, the audience shifting in their seats.

She waited. The violin and bow hung loosely from her relaxed right hand. She thought of all the entrances, all the stages, all her years of Stradivarius. Her arm began to tingle, like the pinprick feeling of warm blood rushing under cold skin. All her years of Stradivarius. All the music that she had played, always with the correct amount of passion and control. All the music that she had been in those moments suddenly swelled in her; she heard every note, felt every beat, tasted every breath that had ever taken her through a complicated phrase. She felt dizzy. A pulse pounded in her stomach. Her hand, and the violin, began to tremble.

The ASM cued her entrance.

She took the stage, head shaking. The audience shifted and rumbled. She found her place in the hot light, and when she breathed, the audience breathed with her. The Judges nodded. She lifted the violin. It felt warm against her neck. One of the Judges asked, "Are you ready?", and she smiled. "Yes," she said, and white heat shot through her; "yes," she said again, and felt a hum inside her like a cricketsong in her bones; and *yes*, she thought, and the door that had been shut so tight within her burst open, and the music battered through, spinning inside every part of her like a dervish, like a whirlwind, like a storm on the ocean that took the tidewater out and spit it back in giant surges. The music in her exulted and laughed and wept and reached out, farther, farther, until she wondered why everyone in the room did not stop, look, point, dance, run. It poured out sweet and strong through her heart and head and hands into the wood and gut of the violin that was her second voice, and her song was *yes* and *yes* and *yes* in a shout and a whisper and a pure, high cry. She played. She saw Monitors stumbling down the aisles and out from backstage, slowly at first and then fast, faster, toward her with outstretched hands and outraged eyes. She saw men and women in the audience rise to their feet, mouths and eyes and ears open, and *they hear*, she thought as the Monitors brought her down, *they hear* as her violin hit the floor and snapped in two with a wail, *they hear* as her arms were pinned behind her, *they hear*, and she smiled. Her hands were empty. She was full of music.

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Laurel Winter's short fiction last appeared in our December, 1993 issue, with another food related story, "The Negotiator." Unlike "The Negotiator," which is science fiction, "The Moon Garden Cookbook" is fantasy. Laurel says she wrote this story "after cooking dinner one evening, tired of the fact that my kids were such picky eaters."

The Moon Garden Cookbook

By Laurel Winter

SUSAN'S SPOON MOVED more slowly as she stirred the sour cream into the Chicken Paprika. When her eye had fallen on the recipe in her Fanny Farmer cookbook, Chicken Paprika had seemed an archetypal meal: savory, meaty, spiced to perfection. Now, although the scent hadn't changed, the hands of the red-framed clock above the stove reminded her that it was almost time to *serve* dinner. No more chopping of tomato and onion. No more lazy spoon spirals. No more fall of spices. She would have to arrange her creation on a bed of wide noodles on a white oval platter her grandmother had given her, and place it in the center of the scraped, marker-stained, fake-wood Formica table and subject it to the opinions of her family.

She sighed and turned off the gas flame. *Please*, she thought to herself, wiping fragrant steam and an anticipatory tear or two from her forehead

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and cheeks, *just let them be polite about it for once — without any reminding.* Tonight especially would be nice, because her PMS was at its peak.

"Dinner," she called toward the family room, where Bob and the kids were watching a "Scarecrow & Mrs. King" rerun.

Her wish was not granted. "What is that?" screeched Amy. "I wouldn't eat that if you gave me a hundred dollars."

Darryl's "Major gross!" was no less emphatic.

Tommy settled for "Yuck."

"We don't say that," hissed Susan. "We say, 'I don't care for it,' or 'No, thank you,' or, 'Gee, Mom, I'm not very hungry." She punctuated her sentences by jabbing the serving spoon into the food on the platter and slopping it onto her plate. Drops of paprika-tinged sauce spattered her shirt.

She passed the platter toward Bob, who gave a weak grin and dished himself about a quarter cup. "Thanks, honey," he said. "Looks interesting." He nibbled some from the end of his fork. "Only problem is, I had a late lunch, and . . . ."

"Can I make myself a peanut butter sandwich?" asked Tommy. Amy poked him — too late — with a skinny elbow.

Susan's anger simmered, bubbled, steamed.

"Leave the table," said Susan, her voice low and deadly. "All of you. I'm tired of your complaints. I'm tired of fixing macaroni and cheese and frozen fish sticks and corn dogs. Just go to McDonald's or something."

She could have been a cobra surveying petrified chickens. No one moved. "Get out of here," she shrieked, pounding her fist on the table and knocking over her water glass.

They scrammed. Before Susan's spilled water could reach the edge of the table and trickle into her lap, the only evidence of family was the sound of the car leaving the driveway.

She didn't even put the encrusted pan in the sink to soak. Tears ran down her cheeks and into her mouth, tainting each swallow with salt water. When she couldn't stand another bite — or another look at her family's four gleaming plates staring at her like eyes, she pushed her chair back and headed somewhere, anywhere, banging the door behind her.

The May air made her hug herself. She strode down the sidewalk, turning left and right at random, crossing in the middle of the block, cutting through alleys. By the time her walk had mellowed into a stroll,

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she was a goodly ways from home in God knew what direction. The exertion made the temperature perfect. If she just let her feet move, she could pretend that she didn't have PMS and a family of picky eaters —rude, picky eaters — and dirty dishes waiting.

She walked past a garage sale.

A garage sale? On a Tuesday evening? Even though Susan didn't "do" garage sales — she detested them, really — she reversed direction.

The narrow, cracked driveway led to a sagging detached single garage almost buried in morning glories, Boston ivy, and two or three other types of vines that Susan didn't recognize. In an ancient lawn chair with half the webbing drooping underneath sat a woman with steel-gray hair that looked as if it were trying to fly away, despite the fact that there was no wind.

Susan tried to adopt the casual "look things over and ignore the fact that you're standing in the midst of a stranger's possessions" attitude of garage sale patrons everywhere. She failed miserably. "Hello," she said to the woman. "Why are you having a garage sale in the evening? On Tuesday?"

The woman looked up from the solitaire game she had laid out on a rickety TV tray. "Can't stand to get up early," she said. "Just having my breakfast now."

Susan gulped. Also on the TV tray was a mug of beer with an egg floating in it. "Oh," she said.

The woman eyed her. "Can't stand crowds, either. That's why I never hold my sales on weekends." She took a long swig of beer; the egg slid down her throat.

"Ah," she said. "You've got a dab of paprika sauce right by your mouth."

Susan automatically put her tongue out and started swiping it around.

"Other side," said the woman. "Lower. Got it." She bent back to her solitaire, leaving Susan to wonder how someone could have distinguished paprika sauce at five paces in the graying light of the May evening.

"I'll just look around," she said. The woman grunted.

The garage was filled with cracked ice cube trays, handleless shovels, cups filled with old toothbrushes, half a telephone, Yale locks with broken keys protruding, and left shoes. Of the few garage sales Susan had actually attended, this one had the highest percentage of trash and the lowest percentage of treasures. And everything was drastically overpriced.

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A flamingo pink wastebasket with a great rift down one side was marked five dollars. A sweater that must have nourished generations of moths hung on a rusty hanger: five dollars. Practically everything was five dollars. Susan shook her head. She was about to leave, when she saw, in the dimmest corner of the garage, a rack of books.

She squinted at them, trying to make out their titles. "Do you have a light?" she called.

The old woman rose from the tattered webbing of her lawn chair and began rummaging in a cardboard box. "Here," she said, holding out a dented metal flashlight.

Susan hurried toward her. "Thank you," she said.

"Five dollars," said the woman, clutching the flashlight to her flat bosom.

"I don't want to buy it; I just —" Susan raised her eyebrows and began searching her pockets. Lint in the left. In the right, way down at the bottom, was a scrunched, washed, faded five-dollar bill. "Here," she said.

The woman snatched the money and handed her the flashlight. It gave off a lopsided, watery circle of light. She made her way back to the books.

A hardback edition of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. Three Harlequin romances. Volume M from the *Encyclopedia Americana*. A novelization of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. *Journal of a Plague Year*. *Bring 'Em Back Alive Frank Buck* and *The Best Baby Name Book*. A scorched copy of *Fahrenheit 451*. And a thin gray volume with spidery silver letters on the spine. Susan picked it up. *The Moon Garden Cookbook*, she read. Shivers ran down *her* spine. She looked for a price. Nothing. She grabbed *Finnegans Wake* off the shelf. None of the books appeared to be marked.

Susan shoved the Joyce back. "Excuse me," she said, picking her way safely through the junk with the help of her "new" flashlight, the cookbook in her other hand. "How much is this book?"

"Book?" The woman raised her head. "What book? Ah." She smiled fondly at Susan. "That's not for sale."

"But," Susan sputtered, "but it was in the garage. It was with the other stuff." She felt a little ridiculous, arguing about something she hadn't even really looked at yet, but she *wanted* that book.

The woman slapped a red jack down on a black king. "Not for sale," she repeated.

It was all too much for Susan's PMS. She started sniffling, then sobbing,

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then outright bawling in the woman's garage. A few minutes into the wailing, the woman looked up again. "All right," she said. "You can have it. Five dollars."

Susan's pockets were empty. Her mind raced. Could she run home and get the money? Hell, she didn't even know where she was. It could take her an hour to get home, and by then the old woman would have reconsidered and locked herself in the house with *The Moon Garden Cookbook*. "You can have this back," she said, planting the flashlight in the middle of the solitaire game. She clasped the book in both hands, half-expecting the woman to protest.

"Fine," the woman said. "Need this more now anyway." She aimed the weak light at her cards with one hand and put a two of spades on a seven of diamonds.

Susan wandered off into the twilight, wiping the ravages of her weeping from her face, and wondering how long it would take her to find her way home to face that family and those dishes.

About two hours.

By the time she reached her block, the moon was a lopsided ball in the sky, lighting her path well enough that she tripped on uneven sidewalk cracks only occasionally. The pseudo-Victorian carriage lantern blazed beside the door to their house.

Susan hid her purchase under her sauce-blotched shirt, took a deep breath, and went in.

For once the TV wasn't on. The kids were sitting around the table, doing their homework or coloring. They looked up warily when she came in, and gave her a subdued chorus of, "Sorry, Mom." She nodded and went into the kitchen.

The place was their idea of spotless: all dishes done, but the drain rack precariously overfilled, and counters given a lick and half a promise. They'd even washed the monstrous Chicken Paprika pan. "Thanks, guys," she called, eyes blurring again. "I think I'm going to bed now."

Sniffling, she headed for the stairway. Bob was reading the paper in the living room. "Good night," he said as she went past, with an expression on his face and in his voice that she couldn't read.

But she could finally read *The Moon Garden Cookbook*. She shed her clothes in a pile near her dresser, ignoring the overburdened clothes tree only a few steps away.

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She didn't bother to hunt for her nightshirt, just slid between the percale sheets of their king-size water bed, doubled her pillow under her head, and turned the reading lamp on. Not since *The Plains of Passage* had she been this anxious to read a book — and that one had been something of a disappointment. Trying to tone down her anticipation, she opened the book.

The endpapers were illustrated with small likenesses of the full moon, so incredibly detailed that she expected them to float off the page and illuminate her bedroom. On one moon was scrawled "Property of Lenore Gilloway." The next few pages were ordinary, title and copyright, that sort of stuff. No introduction, but the book was dedicated to *Every woman who has gazed at the moon.*

She spent a minute or so going over the table of contents. Every section looked equally fascinating. This was not the sort of book she was going to skip around in. She started reading the first section, titled "The Moon Garden."

The Moon Garden, it began, *shall be shaped as the moon is shaped. Into the soil shall be incorporated the blood from a woman's time. The seeds shall be planted during the last full moon in May, at midnight. They shall be scattered from a woman's hand. They shall be pressed into the soil by a woman's feet. No metal shall touch the soil. There shall be no rows, nor stakes, nor labels. Such weeds as will thrive shall be allowed to inhabit the Moon Garden. Only rain shall water the soil. No man shall enter the Moon Garden. Only a woman shall harvest what is put forth. Only a woman shall know these secrets.*

Susan felt no desire to snicker. Before going on, she slipped out of bed and checked the Minnesota Weatherguide Calendar beside the antique secretary where she paid bills and wrote in her journal. The full moon was in three days. And in three days, judging from her aching breasts and volatile emotions, she would have started her "woman's time."

Shivering from equal parts of nudity and anticipation, she jumped back in bed. When the sloshing stopped, she turned to the recipes. The first section was labeled "Appetizers for those without Appetite." Just what she needed, she thought, or what her family needed. The recipes bore titles like "Tempting Tuna Bites" and "Persuasive Pickles." Woven through normal recipe-type instructions were phrases like *pluck from the perimeter of the garden one handful; add to other ingredients.* One handful of

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what? she wondered. In the recipe for "Beguilers," it asked that the woman *sprinkle a pinch of soil over the finished dish.*

The other sections were equally intriguing. "Breads for Bedding and Breeding." "Compliment Condiments." "Versatile Vegetables." "Emotional Entrees." "Desserts They Deserve." "Other."

Some recipes were composed almost entirely of Moon Garden produce. Others had a teaspoon or a dash or a single leaf. By the time Susan reached the section called "Other," she was completely enchanted.

This section, unlike any of the others, had both a warning and a disclaimer at the beginning. *Let her read the recipe through three times before she begins,* it stated. *Let her choose to continue in the knowledge of her own responsibility. Let her realize that she is a woman, apart from the Moon Garden, creator of it, and not its creature.*

That caught her attention. And the recipes that followed held it well. "Childrid Soup." "Candy Curses." Recipes for withering the manhood of unfaithful lovers, for binding the will of unsuspecting friends, for inducing various illnesses. The last recipe in the book was "Rest in Peas," an innocuous vegetable dish that, if her guess about the title was correct, brought about the immediate demise of the eater.

Bob's footsteps sounded on the stairs. Before he reached the bedroom door, Susan snapped the light off, stashed the book under her pillow, and feigned sleep, turning over, just as he came in, to provide a reason for the waves. She hoped he would not regard her nakedness as an invitation.

If her nocturnal acting was not perfect, neither was it tested. Bob eased his body into bed as gently as is possible on a water-filled mattress, and lay quietly on his own side of the bed, without touching her.

The waxing moon shed splinters through the miniblinds. Susan had tracked the progress of the thin bars of light a third of the way across the room before she finally fell asleep, one hand resting on the book beneath her pillow.

THE NEXT day, after the kids left for school and Bob for work, it didn't take Susan long to decide that *No metal shall touch the soil* meant *after* the damn garden was planted. Trying to dig up an immense circle of sod in one corner of the yard without metal gardening tools was impossible. She grabbed every tool she could find from the garage. She chose a short-handled hoe and began hacking at

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the sod. The sweat poured from her face. Her arm ached. Not until she felt a wave of dizziness did she stop, gasping for breath and flopping down in the shade of a variegated dogwood.

The circle she had marked had a diameter of twice her body's length. She had pounded a wooden spoon — that was before she discarded the no-metal rule — into the ground, had lain down with the soles of her bare feet touching it, and, reaching above her head, had gingerly pounded another spoon. When she got up, it pulled out several strands of her hair. She'd tied a string to the center spoon, paid it out until it reached the other, and used that to mark the circumference.

Now, as soon as her heart stopped pumping so wildly, she saw that she had succeeded in cutting a thin strip around the entire edge of the circle, with a few sections gouged out at random from the center. The amount of green left inside the brown rim dismayed her. She groaned, and heaved herself to her feet. If she was to accomplish this in three days — and live through it — she would have to go about it more methodically. She staggered to the house for a pitcher of ice water.

Three gallons of water, six broken fingernails, and a sunburn later, Susan had carved out a brown crescent moon. The heap of discarded sod was growing.

The school bus groaned to a stop; a moment later, she heard the voices of her kids, shedding the constraints of classroom and bus. They were always so loud for a while after getting home. The front door slammed. Susan sat back and composed herself and a set of rules. She couldn't have the kids helping in the garden. Amy would be O.K., because she was a girl, but that would mean the boys would be in there, and she wasn't sure how that would fit in with the first section's "shall nots." And Amy wasn't enough older to use age as an excuse. Besides, if the *Moon Garden Cookbook* worked, she might be using it for years. Then she'd have to come up with other excuses to keep the boys out. No, the Moon Garden was hers and hers alone. No one else was to set foot in it.

She had decided that this one rule would cover everything — oh, and no one else was to water it — two rules, when the back door opened, and the kids found her.

""Hi, Mom," they hollered. "What are you doing?" "A garden? I don't want to weed any garden." "Don't plant vegetables. I hate vegetables."

Susan took a deep breath. "Yes, it's a garden. No, you don't have to weed

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it. As a matter of fact, no one else is to set foot in it. At all." At this point, she narrowed her eyes and looked at each one in turn so they would realize she was serious. "And you are not to water it or set the sprinkler up anywhere near it. And I will plant whatever I please in *my* garden."

After a second of silence, Tommy shrugged and said, "I'm starving. Can I have a snack? Can we have macaroni and cheese for dinner?"

"Go ahead and get a snack," she said. "And you guys can make whatever you want for dinner."

"All right," said Darryl. He and Tommy turned and raced for the door, pushing and shoving one another in an effort to be first. Amy rolled her eyes and followed at a sixth grader's more dignified pace.

When the door shut behind Amy, Susan grimaced. *Whatever you want* usually translated as two large cans of SpagettiOs, nuked in the microwave, complemented by slices of Velveeta cheese and Hi-C. She would be the one who wasn't too hungry tonight. And Bob would undoubtedly have to have twice-warmed SpagettiOs; he hardly ever made it home at dinnertime anymore.

The fact that her muscles quivered and ached didn't diminish Susan's enthusiasm for the project. Hell, even if *The Moon Garden Cookbook* didn't pan out, at least she would have the fresh vegetables. Leeks, tomatoes, lettuce, peas, spinach. She was the only one in the family who liked vegetables cooked in the proper manner. Bob's idea of a vegetable was canned green beans or maybe creamed corn. The only greens the kids would touch were those little clovers in Lucky Charms, and pickle chips on fast-food burgers. At least they ate the more ordinary fruits.

Susan decided to keep working until the kids hailed her for dinner or Bob came home. She stretched and groaned and attacked the sod again.

It was an incredible side effect of the exercise, but even SpagettiOs and Velveeta tasted good. She drew the line at Hi-C, though, draining several glasses of water instead. Bob called as they were eating, and said he wouldn't be home until late. "That's fine," she said. "I'm going to bed early anyway. I'm working on a new garden, and" — how to say this? —"I don't want you to walk in it, Bob. This is my garden only."

"O.K.," he said, sounding relieved rather than puzzled or hurt. "Feet off your garden. Don't wait up for me. Bye."

Susan hung up and went back to her dinner. The last of her second helping had cooled in the bottom of her bowl; she'd have to dig a garden

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the *size* of the moon in order for that to taste good. "I'll do the dishes, since you guys cooked," she said. That was the house policy anyway, although it sometimes didn't stick when she was cooking. They cleared off their own plates and utensils, and then the kids went to watch TV.

One thing to be said for this meal: it didn't require a lot of cleanup. One extra knife from cutting the cheese. One serving spoon. Then just bowls and spoons and glasses. She put a lid on the SpagettiOs bowl and stuck it in the fridge.

Tired turned to exhausted in a hurry. She had washed her hands before dinner, but her knees were encrusted with dirt, and there was a salty film over her entire body from sweating. "I'm going to take a shower and go to bed," she told the kids, yawning mid-sentence. "Is your homework done?"

Darryl shook his head a little more vigorously than necessary, although Amy seemed sincere, and Tommy, in first grade, hardly ever had homework. "Darryl?" she said.

"Oh, all right." Looking put-upon, he extracted himself from some position the posture teachers would have frowned on, and went to his room. Susan gave him a quick hug as he went past, and went to give the same to the other two. "Good night," she said. "Love you."

If the "you, too's" she received in return were a little absentminded, that was O.K.

Susan dragged herself up the stairs. She stood under a pulsating shower head until her arms and back unknotted a little, and then, nude again, crawled into bed. Only, this time, she didn't do any reading before she fell asleep.

In the morning, she could barely move. Only two more days, though. She forced herself to stand, did some stretching and groaning exercises.

The kids and Bob were eating cold cereal when she went down. She poured herself a bowl of Cheerios. "What time did you get in?" she asked Bob.

"Late," he said. "You were asleep."

Obviously, she thought to herself, but she didn't have the energy for sarcasm. Besides, she'd already poured her milk, and she couldn't stand soggy cereal. "Ummm-hmm," she said, still chewing.

Before she finished, all four of them had gone their respective ways. Susan loaded a little cooler with apples, granola bars, and crackers, and filled a gallon jug with ice water. Then she trudged on out to the Moon Garden.

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With slow, steady movements and numerous short breaks, she was able to finish desodding the circle by the time the kids got home. The next day, she attacked the ground with the hoe to break the ground up a little, raking it approximately smooth after. And her period had started. With unusual satisfaction, she was aware of the maxi pad stuck to her underpants.

She drove to Farmer's Seed and Nursery while the kids were making Kraft Macaroni and Cheese, and bought enough seeds to fill an area six times the size of the Moon Garden. She didn't intend to plant the entire contents of each packet, but she did want a variety. Maybe a sprinkle of each.

Dinner that evening was a matter of mechanical movements for Susan. The rest of the family fell into eating the instant-macaroni dish and microwaved hot dogs with gusto. She barely noticed what her fork held. All she could think about was the stash of seeds in her underwear drawer and the waiting ground of the Moon Garden. Tonight — she yawned. How in blazes was she going to wake up at midnight? She couldn't set an alarm, or Bob would hear it. Maybe she'd just stay awake in bed until about 11:30 or so and sneak down then.

Hah. That plan lasted about two minutes. Susan could tell she was falling asleep, but could do nothing about it. Her last conscious thought was the knowledge that she would never wake up before midnight.

It was light in the room when she opened her eyes. But the light was white, ghostly, shed from the full moon that floated outside the bedroom window. Susan jerked upright, causing the water bed to convulse. The green numbers on her bedside clock read 11:49.

She had eleven minutes.

Carefully now, she eased herself over the side of the bed and padded to the dresser, holding the drawer up slightly as she pulled it out so it wouldn't squeak. She grabbed the hem of her nightshirt and made a pouch for the seeds. Quietly down the dark staircase, feeling for each step with a bare foot.

The air was as cold as the colorless moonlight, but Susan barely noticed her goose bumps. *Wouldn't it be something,* she thought, *if this works.* Even if it didn't, though, it was a mystical adventure. A woman's ritual. She reached the edge of the Moon Garden.

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The little paper packets with names like "Burpee" were suddenly inappropriate. Susan sat cross-legged on the grass, her knees making a hollow in the nightshirt. She tore each packet in half and poured the seeds into the basin of her shirt, stirring them with her hands. Then she stood, cradling the mixed seeds against her belly, and stepped out of her underpants and into the Moon Garden.

She walked across the raked soil and stood, legs apart, in the center of the circle. The full moon shone over her, casting strange shadows with no depth. Susan plunged her hand into the seeds and lifted it. Seeds trickled out. Then she flicked her wrist and let her fingers splay, sending an arc of seeds flying through the silver air. She turned a fraction and repeated her motions. Again and again. She was dizzy with the slow turning, intoxicated by the moonlight, mesmerized by her own actions. Finally her fingers closed on nothing but the cloth of her nightshirt.

Susan blinked, let her nightshirt fall to brush her thighs. A few small seeds fell before her. She pressed them into the ground, stepping firmly down, setting her feet half a step ahead at an angle. Without consciously deciding to, she walked a spiral that took her to the edge of the Moon Garden.

A little blood had trickled down her legs. It seemed natural; she wiped it away with her hand and wiped her hands on the dewy grass. Then she slipped back into her underpants and drowsily made her way back to bed.

The next couple of weeks continued smoothly, with Susan's hormones back to normal level. The kids — still a little cowed by the Chicken Paprika outburst — made an effort to be pleasant. Bob was around about as much as usual for these days, but the only waves he made were on nights when he lowered himself into the water bed late.

Susan gathered up all the gardening implements, cleaned them up, and, after they were thoroughly dry, stuck them in a thirty-gallon trash bag in a corner of the garage. Only the handles of the rake and hoe protruded. She didn't want anyone to get the bright idea of messing in her garden if she didn't happen to be around. Then — since she wasn't supposed to water —it was just a matter of waiting.

She dragged one of the picnic table benches over and put it on the house side of the garden, both as a partial barrier from the rest of the yard and as a place to sit. Her skin browned in the spring sunshine, after it finished peeling from the first burn. She sat on the bench at odd moments

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during the day and gazed at the Moon Garden.

Bits of green peeked up, hair-fine or heart-shaped or fuzzy. Some withered; some thrived. Every day, there was new growth and new death in the circle of ground.

It was beginning to look like a real garden, discounting the randomness, by the time the kids' niceness wore off and Susan's hormones kicked in again.

She was gritting her teeth and slapping the table with a dishcloth after a breakfast battle — only two days left of school, and the kids were getting antsy — when it occurred to her that there was probably enough stuff growing for her to use *The Moon Garden Cookbook*. She took it from its new home between *The Enchanted Broccoli Forest* and *The Joy of Cooking*, brought it and a cup of coffee over to the savagely cleaned table, and began to flip through the recipes.

She decided to try just one item tonight. Easier that way to see if it worked. Maybe "Sweetloaf" or "No-Blues Berry Muffins," she was thinking, when she came across a recipe titled "Bland Pudding."

If the name wasn't exactly inspiring, the subtitle made it sound like just what the mother ordered: *To reduce the collisions of spirit and will. Calming.*

Calming. Susan smiled over a sip of coffee and scanned the ingredients, hoping there wouldn't be anything the garden couldn't deliver. Milk, eggs, sugar, cornstarch, vanilla extract — and *one leaf, chosen at random from the Moon Garden*, Susan shook her head. This was beginning to sound more and more unlikely. With her luck, she'd grab some chives, and no one would touch the onion-flavored pudding. What the hell, though.

She meandered out to the garden and began scanning it for a likely looking leaf. "'Chosen at random,'" she said out loud. She closed her eyes, walked forward until she no longer felt lawn beneath her feet, and bent down, plucking the first thing she touched.

She brought it up to her nose and sniffed. Mint. Her eyes flew open. She hadn't planted mint of any kind. It must have been a volunteer. And wasn't it early for herbs? She shook her head again, this time in bemusement, and went back to the kitchen to brew up her pudding.

Just to keep things on an even keel until the Bland Pudding was served, Susan made grilled-cheese sandwiches for dinner, and a fruit salad. She called Bob up and asked him if he could *please* make it home by dinner-

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time for a change, as the kids hadn't seen much of him lately. He reluctantly agreed to try.

The sandwiches were all grilled and staying warm in the toaster oven. The fruit salad was on the table. The Bland Pudding was chilled in the refrigerator in individual bowls with Saran Wrap over them. The kids had just finished watching an old "Family Ties," when Bob pulled up.

Susan put the sandwiches on a plate and announced dinner.

Tommy didn't want to eat his crusts. Amy picked through the fruit salad, avoiding bananas. Darryl complained because she had put in red grapes instead of green grapes. Bob fidgeted as if the seat of his chair were infested with ants. Susan's smile grew taut. "Let's just have our dessert," she said, in dire need herself of some calming.

The family stared at her in disbelief. On other, similar occasions, she had entirely refused to serve dessert. She pushed her chair back and hurried to the fridge.

"Pudding," Amy complained when the bowls were set in front of everyone. "I had pudding at school today."

"Eat it," said Susan. She took a bite of her own and relaxed. Everyone else ate as well, Amy with a martyred expression that dissolved as she swallowed.

It tasted mainly like plain vanilla pudding. Even Susan, who knew it was in there, couldn't separate out the flavor of mint. But there was something in it that made them all tranquil. After they had all scraped their bowls to spoon up the last bite, they methodically finished what was left on their plates. Tommy even ate his crusts.

Susan felt a tingle of something that she vaguely recognized as awe, but she was too mellow to focus in on it. Companionably, they all cleared off. She and Bob took to the living room with the paper, and the kids did the dishes without a single squabble. Homework and bedtime went equally smoothly.

As she and Bob crawled into bed at about the same time, Susan realized it had been a month or more since they'd made love. It was just an observation, though, and she rolled over and went to sleep.

The bland had worn off the pudding by morning, but Susan, with growing excitement at the apparent powers of *The Moon Garden Cookbook*, could handle even PMS and Tommy's spilled bowl of soggy Cap'n Crunch. Tonight she would try one of the appetizers, she decided, and get

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them all to eat real food, food with more than two ingredients, and with seasonings other than too much salt. She kissed them all, even Darryl, who was at an age when kisses from Mom were definitely not cool. Bob's expression was a little strange, but she was too involved in mental menu planning to give it a lot of thought. "Special dinner tonight," she called to him as he headed for the garage. "Be home by six."

At Mr. P's, she bought chicken and sausage and seafood and vegetables — the garden wasn't quite up to providing for paella yet — and saffron. The very first appetizer in the cookbook was something she thought they'd eat without complaining: mini-weiners on toothpicks. The Moon Garden's contribution, *chives and whatever grows nearest* — in this case, some weeds — was boiled with them and then discarded, so they wouldn't be able to pick off the important part.

Susan smiled as she breathed the rich smells. This time, she thought they'd eat it.

Complaints flew around the table like sparrows. She made her set speech about the proper mode of declining, and said, "Well, just fill up on the appetizers, then. You don't have to eat the paella if you don't feel like it."

Four mouths fell open. "We don't even have to take one bite?" asked Tommy, thinking of the standard rule. Amy gouged him with her elbow and gave him a dirty look.

"Not unless you want to," Susan said.

Everyone reached for the appetizers. When the flurry of hands had stopped, Tommy had seven, Amy five, Darryl eight, and Bob three. Susan had one. "Don't want to spoil my appetite," she said, popping the morsel in her mouth.

As soon as she began chewing, she was ravenous for paella. The smell beckoned her, made her mouth water. She reached for the ladle — but Amy beat her to it.

The kids ate paella as if it were mini-doughnuts at the state fair or buttered popcorn at the movies or candy at Halloween. Seconds, they all had, and thirds, not asking what scallops were, devouring chicken and beef and shrimp with equal hunger. Bob and Susan could barely keep up, their own appetites enormous, fulfilled only when the ceramic casserole was empty, scraped so clean it barely needed washing.

"Wow," said Tommy, setting his fork and spoon down; he had been us-

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ing both. "That was good, Mom."

Emphatic nods and muffled "mmmm-hmmmms" echoed his statement. Bob looked more satisfied than he had for weeks. "Delicious," he said. "I didn't think it was going to be that good."

It wasn't, thought Susan. Her stomach was comfortably stuffed. The rest of the appetizers had been pushed off the plates to make room for paella, toothpicks sticking at odd angles. Susan decided it was a lesson in quantity: one or two appetizers each would be plenty.

Over the next few weeks, as the garden began to mature, Susan used *The Moon Garden Cookbook* to help Tommy get over nerves at the beginning of T-ball ("Aplomb Cake") and to stop Amy from being bored ("Curiosity Cream Puffs"). She was able to make foods *she* liked at every meal — as long as she remembered to serve an appetizer. Bob changed his schedule a little — came home for dinner, but left for work again afterward. A big project, he explained. Kind of open-ended.

It didn't bother Susan much at all. She'd been dismayed for a little while to discover that all the delicious eating had put ten pounds on her, but a recipe for "Reducing Tea" took that off right away, and five more as well. She had a cup of it for breakfast every morning. There was even something called "Equilibrium Jam" that seemed to do away with her PMS.

Life was proceeding smoothly, when Bob rolled over one night, gathered her to him in his sleep, and murmured, "Kathy."

Susan shook off the remnants of a dream, a tense spot forming in her stomach. Who the hell was Kathy?

Over the next few days, she tried to convince herself it was nothing. Kathy was a co-worker. Bob really was working late. She called at the office several times, when he'd gone back after dinner, and he answered the phone. Did his voice sound tense?

Susan found herself examining him as if he were a strange new plant emerging from the soil of the Moon Garden. He never just sat down and talked with her about what he was feeling. Had he ever? Even when they were first married? His interaction with the kids was limited to questions like, "How was school today?" and, "Are you trying out for cheerleading?" That was directed at Amy, who was a bit of a klutz and heavily into art.

His favorite cheese was American, Kraft Singles in those individual plastic wrappers. His favorite bread was Wonder bread. Try as she could, Susan could not remember what had possessed her to marry him.

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Three days after the "Kathy," she dug out their wedding album. She would know, she thought, taking a deep breath before opening the ivory silk cover. If she saw the pictures, she would know — and then they could recapture it, rebuild it.

But the pictures were two young strangers scrunched into uncomfortable clothes, with too many attendants. The strongest recollections she had of the entire event were that the mints had turned out the wrong color — lime green instead of the color of rose leaves — and she had developed an intense dislike for Bob's mother.

And on their honeymoon, Bob had taken her to a golf resort. She didn't golf. He did. The nights were great, and some of the afternoons, but . . . .

Why had it taken her this long?

She put the album back in the drawer and went for *The Moon Garden Cookbook*.

There were recipes to reclaim old loves, recipes to cause pimples —she thought of finding "Kathy" and slipping some "Blemishing Cream" into her coffee — recipes to improve one's luck. She made a mental note of "Pot Luck" and turned the page.

"Cornfession." That was it. She farmed the kids out one night to their best friends' houses for sleep-overs and fed Bob "Cornfession." She didn't even have to make an appetizer, which was fortunate, because he liked creamed corn — the base of the recipe — and she loathed it. She had no wish to be confessing anything to him.

After the first bite, he laid his spoon down and said, "Susan, I have something to tell you."

She clenched her fist around the napkin in her lap and tried to stay calm. "What is it?"

Bob rushed on. "I've been seeing someone for a while. I —"

"'A while'?" Susan broke in. "How long is 'a while'? Why didn't you talk to me?"

Bob turned his head away and hugged himself with his arms. "A year," he said softly. "A year."

He looked at her. "I'm in love with her," he said to Susan.

"Who is she?" whispered Susan. "How old is she?"

Bob blushed a dark red. "Twenty-three," he said. "She's the receptionist at work."

For several minutes, Susan was incapable of speech. She stared up at

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the ceiling and thought about stabbing him with a chef's knife or strangling him with a bra. A whole year with a twenty-three-year-old, and he hadn't had the decency to discuss it with her, to try to work out their problems. And what about the kids? That was the main thing that quashed her murderous thoughts: if she killed him, she'd go to prison, and who would take care of them? That and the fact that Bob was stronger than she was, and undoubtedly would not allow her to strangle him with a bra.

"We'll just have to work something out," she said, trying to keep her voice even. "Do you want a divorce?"

Bob looked uncomfortable. "Well, Kathy's not ready to settle down yet. I don't think our lives need to change for a while. I just felt the urge to get it out in the open."

Susan felt the urge to stuff him into the Cuisinart, but she desisted.

Over the next few weeks, she fed Bob stuff from the cookbook. "Scalped Potatoes" made half his hair fall out. "Pandowdy" caused him to dress badly. "Scurry" gave him diarrhea. The remedy she gave him for the diarrhea, "Milk of Amnesia," made him forget Kathy for a day, but he also forgot the kids, so that wasn't a long-term solution.

What did she want to accomplish with all this? Just having him around, even on the "Milk of Amnesia" day, wasn't exactly thrilling. She briefly considered "Rest in Peas," but just because she didn't love him anymore — if she ever really had — didn't mean he deserved to die.

She wanted to be free. If that meant he was also free, so be it. What she needed was the recipe for quick, amicable divorce with plenty of child support.

Susan pored over *The Moon Garden Cookbook*, combining different dishes to come up with the perfect menu, scratching out choices, starting again. When she thought that the meal would give her what she wanted without one part canceling the effects of another, she sent the kids to their friends again and got ready to serve Bob her first complete cookbook meal.

The appetizer was double duty, both to make him hungry and to put him in the proper frame of mind. She had chosen crackers with "Cheese Pleaser." Susan had made a double batch, his and hers, of everything, and left the Moon Garden ingredients out of her food. She had everything dished in their respective bowls and plates and glasses to avoid experiencing the effects herself.

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"Where are the kids?" Bob asked when he came into the house.

"Out," she said. "Let's just eat, O.K.?" She handed him a cracker, liberally spread with "Cheese Pleaser."

He popped it in his mouth. "O.K. Whatever you want."

She had dressed his "Agreeable Green Salad" with "You Bet Vinaigrette." When he was down to a few stray croutons, she said. "Bob, I think we should get a divorce."

"We probably should," he said, accepting the "Heartsick Breadstick" she handed to him. After the first bite, his eyes filled with tears. "Oh Susan," he said, "I'm so sorry for the pain I've caused you."

This was working better than she had expected. Susan couldn't decide whether to feel happy or sad. "I'll be right back," she said, rushing into the kitchen. She took their filled plates from the barely warm oven. She'd put a piece of parsley from the Moon Garden on her own, just to distinguish it from Bob's.

Bob agreed to file for divorce the next day while he was finishing his "Thymely Chicken." He told her she should keep the house while he nibbled on spears of "Asparagift."

She brought up child support as he was eating "Generosity Torte." He wiped his mouth on his napkin. "I can't stand to think of them going without," he said. "After all, college is coming up." He looked at her steadily across the table. "I'll provide for them."

Susan immediately passed him a cup of "Remembermint Tea," extra strong. She had done it. As Bob sipped his tea, she realized that she'd hardly eaten anything herself. It wasn't as if she were hungry, though. She stuck the sprig of parsley in her mouth and started chewing. "I want to be fair," she heard herself say. "You may want to start another family with Kathy at some point. Make sure you plan to keep enough of your income for yourself." What was she saying? But it was right, she felt, right and good. She *did* want to be fair.

It wasn't until Bob had gone off to tell Kathy about the divorce that Susan figured out what had happened. The recipe was in the back of the appetizers section, one of several under the heading of "Guaranteed Garnishes. "Parity Parsley," it was called: *To promote equality between diners. Garnish any food with fresh parsley, plucked with the left hand from the Moon Garden.* Had she used her left hand? Probably; her right had been full of all the different bits of green for Bob's dishes.

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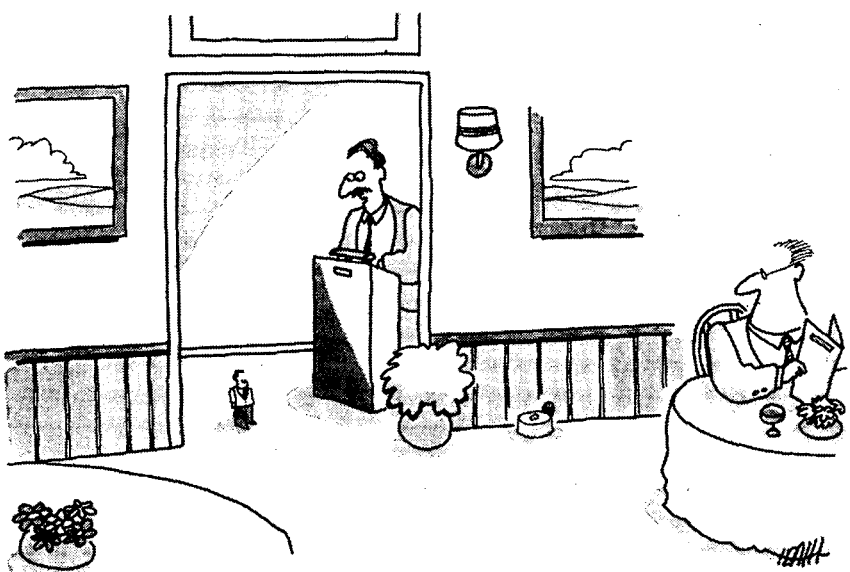
She shrugged. So the child support wouldn't be as lavish as she'd originally planned. They'd survive.

Susan skimmed through *The Moon Garden Cookbook*, alternately crying and smiling. As she flipped pages, she found a recipe that she would try in the near future. "Date Bread." It was supposed to make the eater *unusually attractive to members of the opposite sex*. She'd just have to make sure the kids didn't get their hands on it.

It was going to be a long night, this beginning of the rest of her life. Bob had taken a few things in a suitcase; she wouldn't see the kids until after school tomorrow. Susan's stomach reminded her that she hadn't eaten much.

She found a good, cheery recipe and took a flashlight out to the garden. All she needed was a pinch of something white, and she could make "Apple Better." After she found a weed blossom, she thumbed the flashlight switch and just stood there for a long time. The Moon Garden was beautiful in the light of its friend in the sky.



Evening, Mr. Phelps. Your usual table?

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

TEN THOUSAND YEARS OF SOLITUDE

ONE OF THE chores of physics professors everywhere is fielding telephone calls which come into one's department. Sometimes they ask "What was that I saw in the sky last night?" — to which I reply, "Could you describe it?" This makes for quick work; usually they've seen an aircraft or Venus.

Sometimes calls are from obvious cranks, the sort who earnestly implore you to look over their new theory of the cosmos, or their device for harnessing magnetism as a cure to the world's energy needs. These I accord a firm diplomacy. Any polite pivot that gets one off the line is quite all right. One of the few rules we do follow is that one may not deflect the call to another professor!

In 1989 I got a call which at first seemed normal, from a fellow who said he was from Sandia Laboratories in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Then I sniffed a definite, classic odor of ripe crank.

"Let me get this straight," I said. "The House of Representatives has handed down a requirement on the Department of Energy. They want a panel of experts to consider a nuclear waste repository and assess the risks that somebody might accidentally intrude on it for..."

"That's right, for ten thousand years."

I paused. He *sounded* solid, without the edgy fervor of the garden variety crank. Still...

"That's impossible, of course."

"Sure," he said. "I know that. But this is Congress."

We both laughed. I knew he was okay.

So it came to be that a few months later I descended in a wire-cage elevator, clad in hard hat with head lamp and goggles, and carrying on my belt

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an emergency oxygen pack. I had a numbered brass tag on my wrist, too — "For identification," the safety officer had said.

"Why?" I had asked.

She looked uncomfortable. "Uh, in case you, uh..."

"In case my body can't be identified?"

"Well, we don't expect anything, of course, but you know rules."

We rattled downward for long minutes as I pondered the highest risk here: a flash fire that would overwhelm the air conduits, smothering everyone working in the kilometer-long Waste Isolation Pilot Plant outside Carlsbad, New Mexico.

We clattered to a stop 2150 feet down in the salt flat. The door slid aside and our party of congressionally authorized experts on the next ten thousand years filed out into a bright, broad corridor a full thirty-three feet wide and thirteen feet high. It stretched on like a demonstration of the laws of perspective, with smaller hallways branching off at regular intervals.

Huge machines had carved these rectangular certainties, leaving dirty-gray walls which felt cool and hard (and tasted salty; I couldn't resist). Flood lights brought everything into sharp detail, like a 1950s sf movie — engineers in blue jump suits whining past in golf carts, helmeted workers with fork lifts and clipboards, a neat, professional air.

We climbed into golf carts with WIPP DOE stenciled on them, and sped among the long corridors and roomy alcoves. Someone had quietly inquired into possible claustrophobic tendencies among our party, but there seemed little risk. The place resembles a sort of subterranean, Borgesian, infinite parking garage. It had taken fifteen years to plan and dig, at the mere cost of a billion dollars. Only the government, I mused idly, could afford such parking fees...

Nuclear waste is an ever-growing problem. It comes in several kinds — highly radioactive fuel rods from reactors, shavings from nuclear warhead manufacture, and a vast mass of lesser, lightly radioactive debris such as contaminated clothes, plastic liners, pyrex tubes, beakers, drills, pipes, boxes, and casings.

Fifty years into the Nuclear Age, no country has actually begun disposing of its waste in permanent geologic sites. Many methods have been proposed. The most plausible is placing waste in inert areas, such as salt flats. Also promising would be dropping waste to the deep sea bed and letting subduction (the sucking in of the earth's mantle material to lower

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depths) take it down. Subduction zones have a thick silt the consistency of peanut butter, so that a pointed canister packed with radioactives would slowly work its way down. Even canister leaks seem to prefer to ooze downward, not percolate back up. (A few million years later, fossil wrist watches and lab gear could appear in fresh mountain ranges.) Finally, the highest-tech solution would be launching it into the sun.

All these have good features and bad, but the more active solutions seem politically impossible. Law of the Sea treaties, opposition to launching anything radioactive, and a general, pervasive Not In My Backyardism are potent forces.

The only method to survive political scrutiny is the Pilot Project, sitting in steel buildings amid utter desert waste forty-five minutes' drive from Carlsbad. The Department of Energy regards it as an experimental facility, and has fought endless rounds with environmentalists within and without New Mexico. Should they be allowed to fill this site with eight hundred thousand barrels of low-grade nuclear waste — rags, rubber gloves, wiring, etc.? It is to be packed into ordinary 55-gallon soft-steel drums, which will then be stacked to the ceilings of the wide alcoves which sprout off from the ample halls.

We climbed out of our carts and inspected the chunks of dirty salt carved from the walls by the giant boring machines. Everything looks imposingly solid, especially when one remembers that 2150 feet of rock hang overhead.

But the point of the Pilot Project is that the walls are not firm at all. This Euclidean regularity was designed to flow, ooze, collapse.

We trooped into a circular room with a central shaft of carved salt. Meters placed around the area precisely recorded the temperature as electrical heaters pumped out steady warmth. The air was close, uncomfortable. I blinked, feeling woozy. Were the walls straight? No — they bulged inward. There was nothing wrong with my eyes.

Salt creeps. Warm up rock salt and it steadily fills in any vacancy, free of cracks or seams. This room had begun to close in on the heaters in a mere year. Within fifteen years of heating by radioactive waste left here, the spacious alcoves would wrap a final hard embrace around the steel drums. The steel would pop, disgorging the waste. None would leak out because the dense salt makes perfect seals — as attested by the lack of ground water penetration anywhere in the immense salt flat, nearly a

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hundred miles on a side.

"Pilot" is a bureaucrat's way of saying two things at once: "This is but the first," plus "we believe it will work, but..." Agencies despise uncertainties, but science is based on doing experiments which can fail.

Often, scientific "failure" teaches you more than success. When Michaelson and Morley searched for signs of the Earth's velocity through the hypothetical ether filling all space, they came up empty-handed. But this result pointed toward Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity, which assumed that such an ether did not exist, and that light had the same velocity no matter how fast one moved, or what direction.

An experiment which gives you a clear answer is not a failure; it can surprise you, though. Failure comes only when an experiment answers no question — usually because it's been done with ignorance or sloppiness. The true trick in science is to know what question your experiment is truly asking.

Bureaucrats aren't scientists; they fear failure, by which they mean unpredictability. They tread a far more vexing territory: technology. The Pilot Project has been held up because equipment did not work quite right, because there are always uncertainties in geological data, and of course, because environmental impact statements can embrace myriad possibilities.

Ours was the furthest-out anyone in government had ever summoned forth. No high technology project is a child of science alone; politics governs. The pressure on this Pilot Project arose from the fifty years of waste loitering in "temporary" storage on the grounds of nuclear power plants, weapons manufacturers and assorted medical sites — in "swimming pools" of water which absorb the heat (but can leak), in rusting drums stacked in open trenches or in warehouses built in the 1950s. The long paralysis of all nuclear waste programs is quite probably more dangerous than any other policy, for none of our present methods was ever designed to work for even this long. Already some sites have measured slight waste diffusion into topsoil; we are running out of time.

Of all sites in the USA, the Carlsbad area looked best. Its salt beds laid down in an evaporating ocean 240 million years ago testify to a stable geology, water free. The politics were favorable, too. Southern New Mexico is poor, envying Los Alamos and Albuquerque their techno-prosperity. Dry, scrub desert seems an unlikely place for a future

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megalopolis to sprout — ignoring Los Angeles.

So we members of the Expert Judgment Panel split into four groups to separately reach an estimate of the probability that someone might accidentally intrude into the sprawling, embedded facility. We had some intense discussions about big subjects, reflecting the general rule that issues arouse intense emotion in inverse proportion to how much is known about them. Should we be doing more to protect our descendants, perhaps many thousands of years in the future, from today's hazardous materials? How do we even know what future to prepare for?

Usually we envision the future by reviewing the past, seeking longterm trends. This can tell us little about the deep future beyond a thousand years. Going back 225 years, what is now the Eastern United States was in the late English colonial period. At least in the European world, there were some resemblances to the current world — in fact, some countries have survived this long. For this period, extrapolation is useful in predicting at least the range and direction of what might happen. Going back 1,000 years takes us to the middle of the Middle Ages in Europe. Virtually no political institutions from this era survive, although the continuity of the Catholic Church suggests that religious institutions may enjoy longer lifetimes. Most history beyond 1,000 years is hazy, especially on a regional scale. Prior to the Norman invasion in 1066, English history is sketchy. Beyond 3000 years lie vast unknowns; nine thousand years exceeds the span of present human history. The probability of radical shifts in worldview and politics means that we cannot anticipate and warn future generations based on an understanding of the past, even when we anticipate the use of modern information storage capabilities. There are three types of future hazards. The best are those we can identify and reduce or eliminate, such as DDT and other chemicals. More ominous are those we know little or nothing about, such as some additive or emission — for example, radioactivity wasn't thought to be harmful a century ago. Finally, there are hazards we know pose deep-future hazards but which we do not wish to ban — long-lived nuclear waste, toxic chemicals essential to industry.

Instead, we decide to continue producing it and then shove it away in some dark corner, with warnings for the unwary and unaware. Ancient civilizations did this without a thought; Rome did not label its vast trash heaps, ripe with lead and dis-

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ease. Working on the panel was intriguing but frustrating. We used scenarios to help fix specific possibilities firmly in the mind, allowing us to pick assumptions and work out their implications using common sense in a direct, story-telling way. Like extrapolating from the past, scenarios reduce infinite permutations to a manageable, if broad, group of possibilities. Watching the social scientists particularly grapple with the wealth of possibility open to them, I came to realize how rare are the instincts and training of science fiction readers. We do think differently.

Scenarios, as detailed stories, consider the physical as well as the social environment. They must also be bounded within some range of assumptions, or else the game becomes like tennis with the net down; not doing this negates the usefulness of scenarios in the first place.

Our initial assumptions were:

- The repository will be closed after the proposed period of operation (25 years).
- Only inadvertent intrusions were allowed; war, sabotage, terrorism, and similar activities are not addressed.
- Active control will be maintained of the site during the "loading" and for a century after closure.
- After active control, only passive measures will remain to warn potential intruders—no guards.
- The radioactive materials will decay at currently projected rates, so the threat will be small in ten thousand years.
- No fantastic (although possible within 10,000 years) events will occur, such as extraterrestrial visits, big asteroid impacts, or anti-gravity.

Modern geology can yield firm predictions because ten millennia is little on the time scale of major changes in arid regions like New Mexico. By contrast, myriad societal changes could affect hazards, as readers of science fiction know well.

Our four-man panel (no women accepted the Sandia Lab invitations) worked out three basic story-lines for life around the Pilot Project, based on the role of technology. There could be a steady rise in technology (Mole-Miner Scenario), a rise and fall (Seesaw Scenario), or altered political control of technology (The Free State of Chihuahua Scenario). Envisioning these, arguing them through, was remarkably like writing for *Fantasy & Science Fiction.*

The Mole Miner Scenario: If technology continues to advance, many problems disappear. As Arthur C.

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Clarke has remarked, "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." A magically advanced technology is no worry, for holders of such lore scarcely need fear deep future hazards from present-day activities. Indeed, they may regard it as a valuable unnatural resource. Remember that the great pyramids, the grandest markers humanity has erected, were scavenged for their marble skins.

The societies which must concern us are advanced enough to intrude, yet not so far beyond us that the radioactive threat is trivial. Even though we here assume technology improves, its progress may be slow and geographically uneven—remember that while Europe slept through its "dark ages" China discovered gunpowder and paper. It is quite possible that advanced techniques could blunder in, yet not be able to patch the leaks.

As an example, consider the evolution of mining exploration. Vertical or slant drilling is only a few centuries old. Its high present cost comes from equipment expenses and labor. An attractive alternative may arise with the development of artificial intelligences. A "smart mole" could be delivered to a desired depth through a conventional bored hole. The mole would have carefully designed expert systems for guidance and analysis, enough intelligence to assess results on its own, and motivation to labor ceaselessly in the cause of its masters — resource discovery.

The mole moves laterally through rock, perhaps fed by an external energy source (trailing cables), or an internal power plant. Speed is unnecessary here, so its tunneling rate can be quite low — perhaps a meter per day. It samples strata and moves along a self-correcting path to optimize its chances of finding the desired resource. Instead of a drill bit, it may use electron beams to chip away at the rock ahead of it. It will be able to "see" at least a short distance into solid rock with acoustic pulses, which then reflect from nearby masses and tell the mole what lies in its neighborhood. CAT-scan-like unraveling of the echoes could yield a detailed picture. Communication with its surface masters can be through seismological sensors to send messages — bursts of acoustic pulses of precise design which will tell surface listeners what the mole has found.

The details of the mole are unimportant. It represents the possibility of intrusion not from above, but from the sides or even below the Pilot Project. No surface markers will warn it off. Once intrusion occurs, iso-

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topes could then escape along its already evacuated tunnel, out to the original bore hole, and into ground water.

This is the sort of technological trick sf so often explores. I contributed most of this story, while the social scientists considered less optimistic ones.

The Seesaw Scenario. Many events could bring about a devastating and long-lasting world recession: famine, disease, population explosion, nuclear war, hoarding of remaining fossil fuels, global warming, ozone depletion. Then the rigors of institutional memory and maintenance would diminish, fade, and evaporate. Warning markers — and what they signify — could crumble into unintelligible rubble. Later, perhaps centuries later, society could rebuild in areas especially suitable to agriculture and sedentary life. A tilt in the weather has brought moisture to what used to be southeastern New Mexico. Explorers would again probe the earth's crust for things they need. The political instabilities in the region during the dimly remembered Late Oil Age had kept some of the oil from being pumped out. A quest for better power sources for the irrigation systems of this reborn civilization then leads to the rediscovery of petroleum as an energy source. A search of old texts shows that much oil drilling had been done in the Texas region. Since all the oil was known to have been removed from that region, explorers turn westward to New Mexico. In the spring of 5623 A.D. an oil exploration team comes upon the remains of an imposing artifact in Southeastern New Mexico. "Perhaps they left it here to tell us that there is oil down below."

"Maybe there is danger. We should consult the scholars to see if they know anything about this."

"Ah, you know these old artifacts — all rusted junk. Let's drill and see if there's oil...."

This strongly recalls Walter Miller's classic *A Canticle for Leibowitz* — our "Expert Judgment" recreating the genre, in clunkier prose.

The Free State of Chihuahua: The year is 2583, just after a century of political upheaval in the former American Southwest. After endless wrangling caused by regional interests and perceived inequities in political representation, the United States has fragmented into a cluster of smaller nation states. Similar processes have affected the stability of Mexico, traditionally plagued by tensions between the relatively affluent North and the centralized political control of the South. Its northern provinces have formed the Free State

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of Chihuahua.

Political uncertainty in the Free State leads to a large-scale exodus of Anglo-Saxons, as well as many long-established Hispanic families, from the former U.S. territories. They are escorted by forces loyal to one or the other of the new countries, who practice a scorched earth policy, destroying most of the technological infrastructure, especially installations of potential military value, on the northern side of the former U.S./Mexico border.

The Free State lacks foreign exchange and has a poor credit rating. Because it is limited in available natural resources, its people evolve into a scavenger society, recovering, repairing and reusing all available technical artifacts from earlier times. While making excavations at the former site of Sandia Laboratory, Free State "resource archaeologists" (fancy-named scavengers) discover references to the ancient Pilot Project site, including photographs of waste barrels filled with abandoned tools, cables and clothing. They find fragmentary maps locating the site, but no references to radioactivity. In any case, social knowledge of radiation is limited, due to the development of non-nuclear energy sources during the 21st century — the Age of Ecology now long past.

Arriving at the site, Free State resource archaeologists find the remains of markers which locate the site but do not transmit unambiguously the message that there is danger. They decide to enter. Later, the site is intentionally mined by people unaware of the potential hazard. They breach the site. Ground water gushes up the drill, driven by the long-sealed heat of radioactive decay. This scenario reminds us that no nation has survived for more than a few centuries. Large states tend to fragment into smaller, more culturally coherent ones. For example, the Austro-Hungarian Empire is today divided amongst at least nine smaller countries, and something similar seems to be underway in the ex-Soviet Union only seven decades after its inception. Union with northern Mexico is not critical to the scenario — one can visualize a variety of ways for political control to change. As political control alters, the possibilities of inadvertent intrusion rise.

Gabriel Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* alerted many of us to the subtle cultural differences between North and South America. Trying to store waste for ten thousand years of solitude reminds us, in turn, that cultural and geographical boundaries make no difference over such eras.

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For example, an unspoken constraint on the U.S. program is that the waste must be stored within the country. Why not find better spots elsewhere? Mexico has many salt flats larger than the Carlsbad one.

One of the ethical philosophers on the sixteen-man Expert Judgment panel found this abhorrent. "Risk," he pronounced, "is not morally transferrable."

But of course it is. Anyone who works in a coal mine or lives near a heavily traveled highway incurs extra risk for some gain. How much risk to accept is a personal decision. The ethical pivot is that people should know the dangers they undertake.

But the Pilot Project points to a deeper problem. Over ten thousand years, no continuity of kinship or culture respects borders. Mexicans are the same as, say, New Yorkers — populations shift, societies alter. Risks resolutely kept in New Mexico are the same as risks piled up in Mexico City, for the people diffuse over these passing perimeters within a few centuries. The idea of nationality fades. We really are all in this together, in the long run.

Of course, the above scenarios don't exhaust the possibilities; they only sketch out the conceptual ground. We also considered a "USA Forever" yarn which assumed government could indeed keep continuous control. It yielded a smaller risk, but we thought it had much smaller probability of coming true.

Such stories are fine, but how could we use them to predict quantitative probabilities? Congress wanted a number, not a short story anthology.

We believed two elements of these scenarios most directly affect the likelihood of inadvertent intrusion: political control of the site region, and the pattern of future technological development. How could we use this intuition?

Here we used a "probability tree," which links chains of events in a numerical way akin to the simple estimates I discussed in "Calculating the Future," (*F&SF*, September 1993). After much wrangling, we settled on a ballpark estimate of less than 10% chance the site would suffer intrusion.

The major risk came from the seesaw scenario of technological decline and rebuilding. For this we estimated the probability of drilling intrusion. The neighborhood (approximately 400 square miles) suffered roughly one drilling per year over the last century. Assuming random drilling, the buried waste's area of about half a square mile should then have a probability of about 0.001 per year of

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drilled intrusion. If over 10,000 years such eras occur a hundredth of the time — -i.e., a century in all — then there is a one percent total probability. Adding in other scenarios gives a final sum of a few percent.

Do I believe this? Of course not, in its details. When we wrote up our result, and found that the other three teams of four each had gotten the same few percent result, I reassured the head of the program that we could even guarantee the answer. "If there's an intrusion, I'll pay back ten times my consulting fee...ten thousand years from now."

Then I learned that since we finished our report first, the other teams knew our answer before they finished theirs — bad technique. A convergence of opinion is common in all prognosticating, and "experts" like us were not immune to it.

I had further worries. Physics has dominated our century, but biology may well rule the next. The implications of the Human Genome Project and rapid progress in biotechnology remind us of a more general truth: The most difficult realization about the future is that it can be qualitatively different than the present and past. This implies that an irreducible unknown in all our estimates arises from our very worldview itself, which is inevitably ethnocentric and timebound. Are we being too arrogant when we assume we can accurately anticipate far future hazards or protection mechanisms? Probably — but we have no choice. Waste of all sorts stacks up and we must do our best to offset its long term effects.

The Department of Energy was happy with our estimate. They and Congress could tolerate risks up to about ten percent. At present, the Pilot Project staff is gearing up for a trial run to further study the salt creep, how it seals, etc.

Personally, I believe the Pilot Project will be filled, and that's only the beginning. Storing all our accumulated nuclear waste, not just the low-radioactivity debris the Pilot Project is designed for, would take about ten more such vaults.

What's the point, politically or practically, in dispersing the sites? The only other site for disposal, Yucca Mountain in Nevada, is under heavy technical and political pressure. All our waste for a century could go into that single salt flat near Carlsbad.

Confining the area both lowers costs, reduces total risk, and localizes damage if it occurs. It's also politically astute. The locals want the work and the opponents in northern New Mexico have nearly run out of legal delays. They seemed to oper-

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ate out of a Not In My Back Yard psychology, with no alternatives. Part of the problem with waste of all sorts is that fears have been blown so high, few really perceive the rather minute level of risk. That was why Congressional fretting over ten thousand years from now seemed so bizarre to the panel, who actually knew something about real risks.

During our deliberations, television stations sent their cameras and environmentalists demonstrated. I asked one of the placard-carrying men where he was from. "Santa Fe," he answered. I was surprised; he lives many hundreds of miles from the site.

"They might bring some of that waste through my town, though," he said. He was right. Spills during transport are a real, if remote, possibility. I wanted to talk to him further about sentiment in Santa Fe, which leads opposition to the site, but I couldn't tolerate his company any longer. He was puffing steadily on a Marlboro.

He could well claim that smoking was his choice, his risk — and unless he spoke out, he had no control whatever over nuclear waste. But then, there is always second-hand smoke. And the waste was generated by the federal government, an obligation settled upon all of us.

Neither Congress nor the Department of Energy has pondered the long-term issue of disposal in one site yet, but I think it is obviously coming. The waste must go somewhere.

If we halted all nuclear power and weapons production tomorrow, we would still have a vast pile of medical contamination to care for. Nobody, I believe, wants to do away with cancer diagnostics and treatments, which produce great volumes of mildly radioactive waste.

Suppose I'm right. This leads directly to the next question: How do we warn the future about the dangerous package we've sent down the timeline? A whole new panel pondered that question. I'll report on it next time.

Comments (and objections!) to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717.

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Robert Reed has returned to our pages with another of his wonderful science fiction stories. "Treasure Buried" is a near-future sf tale of the best kind, one that focuses on people as well as technology.

Treasure Buried

By Robert Reed

R&D WERE UP AGAINST THE titans from Marketing, seven innings of groin-pulling, hamstring-shredding, take-no-prisoners slow-pitch softball, and Marketing had stacked their team. It was obvious to Mekal.

"What do you think, Wallace? That kid in center field? He's got to play college ball. And their shortstop, what's her name? With the forearms? I bet if you stuck her you'd get more testosterone than blood, I bet so. And Jesus, that pitcher has *got* to have a dose of chimp genes. You haven't been moonlighting, have you, Wallace? Arms like those. Reaching halfway to home plate before releasing. But hey, Meiter drew a walk at least. If they don't double us up, I'm getting my swings. So wish me luck, Wallace. I'm planning to go *downtown!*"

Wallace nodded, uncertain what "downtown" meant and certainly bored with the pageant happening around him. He was aware of Mekal rising to his feet — a tall rangy man old enough not to be boyish anymore, yet not softened enough to be middle-aged — and then Wallace wasn't aware of

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anything besides the sunshine and his own convoluted thoughts. "Chimp Genes" reminded him of a problem at work. Not Wallace's problem, but he was the resident troubleshooter and the Primate Division was having more troubles with their freefall monkeys. The little critters weren't behaving themselves in orbit, either their training or their expensive genes at fault. They were put into the space stations to help clean and to keep the personnel company. Friendly, cuddly companions, and all that. But the prototypes were shitting everywhere and screaming day and night. And Wallace was wondering if it was something subtle, even stupid, overlooked as a consequence. Zero-gee, freefall...was it some kind of inbred panic reaction? Maybe the monkeys had troubles with weightlessness. What if...what if they felt as if they were falling, tailoring and instinct making it seem as if they were tumbling from some infinitely tall canopy — a thousand mile drop, the poor things — and with that sweet possibility in mind Wallace heard the *crack* of a composite bat, Mekal standing at home plate, screaming:

"Go go go you ugly fuck of a ball!"

A blurring white something arced across the soft blue sky, geometric perfection drawing Wallace's attention; and then the center fielder jumped high against the back fence, ball and glove meeting, his grace casual to the point of insulting and the inning finished. Five runs down already, and Mekal stormed back to the dugout in the worst kind of rage — silent — standing without moving for a long moment, unable to focus his eyes or even think. It was that famous Mekal intensity. In R&D he was feared and sucked up to, some employees openly hoping that the man's temper would cause some vital artery to burst in his brain. Not necessarily killing him, no. But causing a constructive kind of brain damage, removing the most offensive portions of his personality —

— and then there was a voice, close and almost soft. The voice said to Mekal, "But you almost did it." A woman's voice. A girl's. Nobody Wallace knew, and he turned his head before shyness could engage, the girl watching Mekal with a mixture of concern and wariness. "Maybe you should warm up," she continued. Then she added, "Dear?" with a quieter voice.

Mekal came out of the spell, finding his old resolve. He snorted and said, "Yeah, right." His glove...where was it? Then he said, "Wallace? Tell you what, since you're here and all, why don't you chart Marketing's hits? All right? Which field and how far, that sort of data. Give us an edge next time.

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Will you do that for me, pal?"

"I'll try. Sure."

"Try?" Mekal laughed and shook his head. *"Do!"*

"Good luck," offered the girl; and again Wallace looked at her, her pretty face a little too round for the current fashion, her long blonde-white hair worn simply, blue-white eyes radiant, both hands reaching through the chain-link and their smoothness implying true youth, one finger adorned with a diamond-heavy ring, a gold band nestled beside it. She said, "Darling — ?"

"You'd better get back in the stands," Mekal told her. "It's all right. I'm fine. Fine."

She nodded, tried a smile and then tried to say, "Just do," with her husband's intensity. That was Mekal's rallying cry in R&D. *"Just do."* Except it didn't have the impact, coming from her mouth. A couple other R&D players smiled at the sound of her voice, and Mekal made the dramatic walk to the pitcher's mound. As much as Marketing, the R&D players were glad that the long fly ball had been caught. Wallace could sense it, smell it. Because if Mekal won this game single-handedly, they knew he wouldn't be bearable for at least a week. He'd prance and grin, making life miserable in the labs, which is why some of them giggled now, taking their warm-up throws out of the dirt and joking about the oncoming rout.

Wallace himself didn't dislike Mekal. Not really. He assumed some kind of insecurity fueling the man, some partly hidden weakness or flaw, and with that in mind Mekal was bearable. Sometimes amusing. Even friendly, given the right circumstances. But then again, Wallace was a legend for his easygoing attitudes. His ego genes were deleted, making room for more important talents. A different kind of fuel driving him....

And now Mekal's wife retreated, Wallace studying her bare legs — a little thick but firm — and the way she carried herself, not with submissiveness but with an enduring patience, allowing a couple screaming children to play chase around her legs and then stopping to help some grandmother off the wooden bleachers. Mrs. Mekal; a strange concept. But then Wallace was always surprised by people's private lives...and now the girl took a seat up high, near the center, her gaze steady and honest and her applause genuine whenever R&D managed to make an out against the juggernaut from Marketing.

"What the hell are we doing, people?" Mekal screamed from the mound,

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his face ready to burst with all the blood. "Be crisp! Be alert! Execute, execute! Eight runs down is nothing!"

Another pitch, then the ominous swift *crack*.

"Just do," Wallace muttered to himself, diagramming another blast into left field. *"Just do."*

He solved the monkey puzzle — it was the freefall sensation, in part — then helped Simmons and Potz in the Microbe Division, learning enough about green algae genetics to see new possibilities; and somewhere in the midst of work, without planning it, he asked Potz about Mekal's young wife. How long had they been married, how many children?

"Three years, and none." Potz gave her coffee a quick suspicious glance. "Rumor says that Mekal lacks. Wants kids and can't. Only you know rumors, it could be a lot of hopeful thinking from the downtrodden. The prick shoots blanks, and all that."

Wallace absorbed the comments, nodding and then saying, "He doesn't wear a ring, does he?"

"Probably allergic."

"She looks young. What is she, ten years younger than him?"

"More like fifteen. Met her when he was doing one of those community relations lectures at the college." Potz plucked a thick brown hair from her coffee cup. "Not mine. Yours? No? God, I was in Meiter's lab this morning. He had that yeti skullcap on a countertop, and you don't suppose...uggh!" Then she sipped her coffee anyway, smiling eyes on Wallace.

He didn't notice her expression. He was thinking hard about several things, some of them invisible even to him. Wallace was famous for his long pauses and the sluggish, thoughtful voice, particularly when some problem deserved his full focus. The yeti skullcap, yes. He had to find time to go over the genetic maps with Meiter, its authenticity established but the Company unsure what to do with their investment. Rumors said that the Tibetan monks had sold it to them for a small fortune. Their people were arming against the Chinese again, selling art and oddities worldwide. What if they'd sold other yeti artifacts to their competitors? It was a problem, all right. Cloning the yeti would bring it back from extinction, which was good news. But were the genes too close to human? That was the main issue now. There were half a billion rules and regulations concerning genetic work with human

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substances. Maybe it would be best for their competitors to move first. Let their fancy lawyers hit the beach, and all that. That's how the Executives would be thinking now. Besides, where was the profit in cloning yetis? They'd make a splash, sure, but not like ten or twenty years ago. Resurrecting the dead—one of Wallace's favorite things—had reached its high water mark when the Japanese cornered the market on carnosaurs. Tailored monitor lizards, in effect. But how could shy near-humans compete with that scale of things?

Eventually Wallace was aware of sitting alone, Potz and her coffee gone and his stomach aching from hunger. He had forgotten lunch. What time was it? Three? He went to the cafeteria, bought candy bars and Pepsi, then returned to his office intending to work. Only he found himself daydreaming about Mekal's wife, his imagination taking him as far as a conversation at the ball park. Of course the chance of Wallace ever having the chance seemed remote. He was famous for his imagination—indeed, almost everyone in the industry knew one or two Wallace stories — but to save his life he couldn't envision anything more than speaking to the girl, and then just for a few moments. In passing.

"So forget it," he warned himself. "Get to work, will you?"

Potz had given him some data. Wallace sipped warm Pepsi, then a cold dose of old coffee, punching up files he had begun during graduate school. They were like old trusted friends, these files. Trusted but secretive. Genetic maps flowed past him on the screen, in vivid colors, thousands of base pairs forming unique, easily recognizable patterns that were *almost* repeated in other species. Related ones or not, it didn't matter. Every eukaryotic organism on Earth had excess DNA. Most of it was leftover stuff from ancient times. Early life had been sloppy, genetically speaking, full of useless genetic noise that natural selection had flattened into a kind of hum. Flat, harmless. A lot of the DNA was poly-A — adenine bases repeated for huge spans. But what Wallace had noticed when he was twenty, what had struck him as puzzling, were chunks of DNA buried in the poly-A. Bursts of static, sort of. There were several thousand base pairs, some of it common to *all* eukaryotes. Yet the stuff produced no polypeptides, nor did it seem to influence the expression of any other genes. What could be so important that it was shared by green algae and PhDs? He had no idea. Which was why he recorded new data whenever possible. For more than a decade, Wallace had plotted the

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differences between all sorts of species, finding no evolutionary patterns. None. It was such a useless but distinct bit of genetic noise — a biochemical shout, more than anything — and he found it humbling to consider the problem every little while. Like now. Potz's algae data added to the puzzle, and Wallace perched over the screen, hoping against hope for some kind of inspiration.

What made no sense, he knew, was misunderstood.

Misunderstood, or wrong. And either way Wallace felt a sacred duty to solve or to fix.

"What are you doing?" asked a girl's voice.

And now Wallace began explaining the problem to the imaginary Mrs. Mekal, her standing over him with the blonde-white hair hanging limp, the soft ends brushing against his cheek and feeling very nearly real.

WALLACE WENT to three other softball games. R&D won once, managing to squeak past a pack of gray-haired Executives 11-10; but Mekal's wife never showed again, even in passing. Which seemed to help, because Mekal wasn't quite so unbearable. He even managed to control himself when they won, limiting his high-fives because the winded, red-faced opponents were still and always his superiors. Their position on the pecking order was secure, and Mekal wasn't an idiot. Yet his good mood persisted into the next morning, him bringing doughnuts for two hundred and inviting some of his closer associates to his home next Saturday night. "A social thing, for a change." He grinned and asked Wallace, "Are you interested?"

"What time?"

Which surprised Mekal, but just for a moment. "So you're feeling social, huh? Well then, good. Eight o'clock. Bring a date if you want. Your choice."

No date. He could have picked one of two girls that he saw casually, but either would have been a distraction. A filter. Instead he drove himself to the big house built on a leveled blufftop, Mekal at the door, Wallace walking into the big living room with its picture window, him drinking in the view of dusk and the river, wondering all the time: "Where is she?" It was eight o'clock and half a dozen minutes. Almost no one had arrived yet. What Wallace had hoped to find was noise and confusion, using them as a smoke screen to cover his shyness and the uncomfortable silences. But people never arrive on time

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for parties; he'd forgotten that salient fact. And he turned just as the girl emerged from the kitchen, his scheme gone. Deflated. He offered the weakest smile, and she handed him a heavy glass filled with sweet punch brighter than blood. "You look thirsty," she reported. "He said, 'Give Wallace a drink, ' and you're Wallace, right?"

"Yes." Nobody else around. Just them....

"I'm Cindy. Cin, for short. Whichever." She smiled, showing perfect teeth as small as a child's. "How does it taste, Wallace?"

He sipped and said, "Very good. Thank you."

"My husband made it. Some special recipe of his."

Suddenly it didn't taste as delicious, but Wallace kept drinking. He was quite thirsty and afraid that Cindy — Cin — would leave him now. She would feel that her duty as hostess was finished, or some such thing. So he turned back to the window and said with force, "It's a lovely view you have."

Were the words as contrived as they sounded?

But she replied, "Thanks," and nodded happily.

"And it's a beautiful house."

"You've never been here before?"

"No."

"Well, thanks again then."

Yet when he examined his surroundings — the living room and dining room and the faraway front door — he saw nothing that reminded him of anyone except Mekal. Things were clean, but the furnishings and wall hangings exuded maleness, a faintly Western atmosphere, everything possessing utility and an indifference to bright colors. The sole feminine touch was Cindy; she was dressed in a very feminine gown, light and blue like her eyes, and more than a little clinging. Yet the girl — she looked like a college student playing a grown-up — obviously didn't belong here. She was alien. Wallace could see that much, so much so that he fought the temptation to say, "Get out of here! You don't belong here! Run!"

Their conversation continued, deliciously ordinary; and in the middle, without any warning, Cindy assured him, "He thinks the world of you." Then she winked, just slightly. "Which is something for him."

Mekal. She meant Mekal. Wallace didn't know how to respond, moving his empty glass from one hand to the other.

"You help everyone in R&D, he says. 'Wallace is the intellectual grease

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for us!' Actually, I think he's a little jealous, although he'd never admit it to anyone. Never."

"I suppose not," said Wallace.

"You know my husband...."

To which Wallace thought: "You and he don't belong together. This is a mistake, you two. All wrong!"

He felt it — *knew it* — almost shivering from the stress of keeping his knowledge inside himself.

He wasn't thinking about love, even his own love for the girl. He was oblivious to it. If someone had told him, "You're smitten, Wallace," he would have denied it, never sensing that he was lying.

And besides, love wasn't the point.

The point — and no other seemed more important in the world — the point was that Cindy and Mekal were existing against the laws of nature. Marriages should be working unions. The poor girl was chasing a fatherly figure, no doubt. And Mekal was scrambling to regain his youth. It was a shame, he felt, and a little sad; and he found himself frowning while Cindy said something about it being nice, company coming like this, and she wished they could do it more often, and would he like some more punch? Snacks? "Help yourself," she told him. "Make yourself at home."

"Come see," said Meiter. "We got it this morning."

It was a month later, softball season finished and volleyball season starting; and Wallace looked up at Meiter, coming out of his daydream and asking, "What are you talking about?"

"The hand! It's here!"

The yeti hand, sure. Wallace remembered hearing the rumors, antiaircraft missiles exchanged for a dismembered chunk of fossil tissue. Meiter took him to the freezer, letting him peer in through the frost. "See? Mangled but whole. And old. Maybe thirty thousand years old, we think. Some kind of anaerobic circumstances preserved it. Peat moss. A deep cave. Something. Whatever it was, there's virtually no decay. We're already running the first maps. Fossils don't give whole cells, but the hand's never read the textbooks. We've got nice fat whole ones. No need to jigsaw things together, it looks that good!"

"It looks human," Wallace mentioned. "Doesn't it?"

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That disturbed Meiter. "Oh, I don't agree." Then he asked, "How would you know, anyway? It could be an apish hand just as well — "

"Maybe so."

"And the good part, the best part, is that it's female. The skullcap's male, and here we've got a lady. They're separated by three hundred centuries, which assures genetic diversity. Mekal's saying that the big kids upstairs are thinking about making a splash, playing up our charity in bringing yetis back. They're even talking about buying up part of Nepal, making a preserve, planting new forests and using human volunteers to carry the little critters part-term. Neat, huh? You bet it is!"

Wallace looked at the ugly bunch of bone and brutalized meat, knowing it was human. Chromosome numbers were the same between humans and half-humans; he didn't fault Meiter. But what was, was. What any person believed never changed what was real and true. That was the first lesson that he carried into work every day — the towering impotence of his hard-held opinions — which helped him think and rethink, always seeing the old as new.

Later Meiter came with the sorry news. "A human hand," he said bravely, "but it's not all lost. It's got some primitive genetics, which means the academics will be curious. Human evolution and all that stuff."

Wallace had a thought.

He asked, "Are you going to keep mapping? Because I'm not sure anyone's ever done a total map of such an old, high-quality fossil."

"And tie up the machinery? Take lab-tech time?"

He couldn't have given any reason; Wallace had only a feeling, distinct but imprecise, that something useful might come out of it.

"Listen," he said. "why don't you keep people at it? If you need, I'll get Mekal's signature. Okay?"

Meiter hesitated.

Then Wallace said, "Just do!"

Meiter laughed. "All right. We've got a block of empty time soon. Someone gives me shit, I'll send them to you."

And a couple days later it was done. Wallace asked his computer to find such-and-such series of bases among the poly-A — you never knew where it might be — but soon it became obvious that thirty thousand years ago, in at least this one unfortunate woman, the telltale bit of DNA was missing.

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Yes, he thought, it couldn't serve any important genetic function.

And yes, probably no other researcher on the globe would care about such a tiny treasure.

Yet Wallace found the enthusiasm to open every file, working through the night and the next day, then losing track of an entire weekend, again and again asking himself why every living organism now had this one genetic shout...and finally perceiving a simple, coherent answer that he checked and double-checked and then triple-checked, becoming more certain every instant. At long last..."Good God!"...placing both hands flush against the top of his desk, rising and trying to find the doorway to his office of six years....

It was a night of supreme clarity; and Wallace knew he was at his pinnacle. Never again, no matter how long he lived, would he succeed in anything so glorious, so wondrous.

Yet while he wandered the hallways, hunting for anyone to tell his news, if only a napping guard, he had a new thought, stopped and dipped his head, concentrating hard on a new possibility.

Five minutes, and he'd superseded his first success.

Hands shaking with excitement, tired eyes weeping, Wallace felt the ceiling split as his joyous spirit sailed free...!

"You look like shit," Mekal reported. "Glance at a mirror, Wallace. I'm worried. My prize heifer, and you look wrung out and half-dead. Not to mention your aroma, which isn't pretty either."

"I need sleep," Wallace conceded. "I'm going home now."

"On Monday morning? You can't just leave us dangling!" Mekal waved a finger at him. "Hampston and Yates hit another wall with their pigeon project. Not with the natural genes, but it's the tailoring part. I know that's not your area, but this is a contract job and the client's getting nervous — "

"Tomorrow," he promised. Then he said, "I just wanted to talk first. I've got a problem of my own, a little thing...but it might be important. I don't know why, but I keep getting this feeling."

"Well, great!" Mekal meant it. "Jesus, we get bonuses because of your hunches. Soon as you're done with the pigeons, I'll schedule you some extra time."

"I've had time. I can't figure it out."

"Really...?"

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"Maybe, I was wondering...you could try, maybe. How about it? I'll give you the file codes, my notes, and you work on it. At your own pace. Give me a vacation from the damned thing, okay?"

"Really?" Mekal was more surprised than suspicious. Wallace giving *him* work? Trusting *him* with a puzzle beyond Wallace's reach? It took Mekal several seconds to engage his ego, then he nodded and accepted the challenge. "What the hell, sure. I'll muscle in time. Cin's got volunteer stuff tonight, she'll be out of my way...yeah, I can give this bird a try."

Which he did. For several days he played with the bird's wings, looked into its eyes, and accomplished nothing. For more than a week Wallace avoided his associate, eavesdropping on the man's use of his files but nothing more. Wallace had set things up to make nothing too obvious, yet he'd left enough hints to lead in proper directions. Or had he? What seemed transparently obvious to Wallace was baffling Mekal. Mekal wasn't stupid by any means; but sometimes, watching the man pull and replace files, Wallace felt like bursting into his office and shouting at him. Telling him, "It's so damned obvious. Just think about it *this way!*"

"What I think," Mekal reported next week, "is that it's useless crap. It's something persistent, sure, but that's because of structural properties. Nothing else."

"Not true," Wallace replied without doubts. "And why's it everywhere? Can you explain its distribution?"

"I know, I know. It looks odd, you're right. The same parts are always the same, regardless of species. The middle stuff varies, and I can't explain why. Maybe a dead old virus code — "

"Inside oak trees and people?"

"A universal virus, maybe?"

"But not inside a woman who died thirty thousand years ago. Nor in any of the incomplete fossil samples."

"A genetic fart then." Mekal tried laughing.

"You're going to give up?" Wallace spoke as if injured. (He wasn't. He was panicky.) "I've been working on it for years. You've already done a good job excluding things, narrowing the suspects. Can't you keep at it some more? A little while?" He paused, then asked, "Just do? Can you?"

Just do.

There was an instant when Mekal seemed disgusted and thoroughly

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disinterested; but those two words had their effect, percolating into him, pride or fear of failure causing him to say:

"All right. When I've got time. But that's all I promise."

And with that Wallace returned to his office and carefully, on the sly, inserted a few more telling clues into some files not yet accessed. Hoping it was enough. Hoping, yet in the same instant sensing that it wouldn't be. Not quite yet....

NOTHER TWO weeks of nothing. Wallace was stuck on the pigeon work, and Mekal worked harder than he'd ever admit, using his nights and both weekends and his face drawn and tired when he approached Wallace, asking if he'd come to tonight's volleyball match. They might need him to sub, or at least score. How about it? So Wallace came, and after the first game Cindy arrived, coming from an aerobics class with sweats over the colored tights. Too bad. But Wallace was in heaven when she took the empty chair beside him, remembering his name and then cheering for her husband in the second game.

They were matched against the bastards from Marketing again. Everyone on Marketing was at least six two, it seemed, and they had flutter on their shoes. The game was forever on the brink of a slaughter. Mekal's heroics kept them within seven or eight points. Then as a long volley looked won, Cindy bent close to Wallace and said, "You know, he hates when I watch. He's afraid he'll look — "

There was a scream, a spongy white ball bouncing to death and Mekal on the hard floor, gripping an ankle and his face the color of cottage cheese. A bad sprain was the verdict. He was helped from the court, and Cindy dashed back from somewhere with ice and towels. Wallace watched as she doctored her husband, her concern obvious and her manners motherly; and she seemed to know when her attentions embarrassed him, because suddenly she returned to her seat beside Wallace, watching Mekal in the corner of her eye but otherwise letting him sulk alone.

"I don't even know her," Wallace told himself. "I've spent what? Maybe ten minutes in my life spent talking to her, and what am I thinking? Am I crazy now?"

Potz had come off the bench, luckily. Three years of high school

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volleyball showed in her digs and the clean arcing sets, and R&D managed to stage a comeback. The game was hanging in the balance for what seemed like forever.

At one point Mekal tried walking, the limp weak and painful to watch.

He ended up sitting on the opposite side of Wallace, watching everything with a mixture of agony and feverish intensity; and maybe that's why Cindy tried to change the subject, sensing that it would be best to deflect everyone's attention, if only for a bit.

"So how's your pigeon business going?" she asked Wallace.

He tried to remember what pigeon business. His mind started and stopped, then moved again. He said, "Better, mostly."

"Mekkie told me about it — "

Mekkie?

" — and it sounds exciting. And lovely. How many passenger pigeons are you making? I mean in this test flock."

"Fifty thousand," Wallace allowed.

"That's very noble of you," she assured both of them.

Then Mekal snapped, "It's for a pizza chain. It's so they can sell more pizzas."

"Nonetheless." She refused to be cynical. "A good thing is a good thing, no matter its motives."

Wallace felt a little weak. She sounded so young and noble and sweet, and he nearly forgot to record the next goal.

Then Cindy was telling him, "I've troubles understanding genetics. Mekkie's explained them a thousand times. Base pairs and dominating — "

"Domin*ance*," her husband corrected.

" — but it's all such a muddle to me. I guess I'm just too slow to pick it up."

"No, you're not," Wallace responded. "I'm sure you're not."

"No?"

"I know you're not."

Mekal seemed oblivious to them, his brow furrowed, eyes tracking after the arcing ball.

Wallace had an idea, an inspiration. "How about if I explain genetics? I'll tell you how *I* think about them."

Cindy smiled while looking straight ahead. "Okay. Do."

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"Think of DNA as another way of talking. That's all. Chromosomes and the rest of it are just machines that record the words in the DNA. Genes are a set of instructions meant for the future. They tell new generations how to build proteins, metabolize, then reproduce when it's their turn. The actual parts are simple. What's complicated is that there are so many parts, you see? I don't understand more than a fraction of the whole setup, and it's my job. Which is why I feel pretty humble most of the time."

"Do you?" she asked.

"Oh, sure." He paused, deciding what to say next. Then he heard his voice coming out of him, seemingly of its own volition. "Think of your genes this way. Your parents and grandparents and all the way back...all those people are talking to you, millions of biochemical voices working together, and the words are wrapped up in machinery more complicated and much, much more reliable than any machine people have ever built."

"That's something to think about," she said.

Mekal stretched out his sore leg, saying nothing.

"We're full of stuff, and a lot of it isn't even used anymore. For me it's like hunting for treasures, doing what I do." Then he decided to forget caution, pressing ahead. "I just had a weird thought. This is the same subject, just a different way of looking at it. Suppose someday we go to another star and find life on a planet. It's more primitive than Earth, but maybe someday it'll get to building campfires and condos. Who knows? So anyway, we decide to leave a message for the future. We can carve stone, I suppose, but what if the stone weathers away? We can put a message on the planet's moon, but no place is really safe. I mean, what we want is to be able to tuck our message where nothing can destroy it. We make a simple code, but where can it go? Where would a code be repaired and replicated without our having to worry — "

"In the genes? The alien ones?" Cindy seemed genuinely excited, asking him, "Am I right? That's what you're saying, isn't it?"

"I suppose so." It was the logic that Wallace had employed several weeks ago. "If I ever find myself in a starship, it's something I'd consider."

Nobody spoke for a long moment.

Boom went the serve, flat and fast, then dipping to the floor. Point! Game! Match!

But Mekal didn't curse or even grimace. Indeed, when he rose to his feet,

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icewater dripping from the towels around his foot, he managed a limping gait while gazing into the distance. At nothing. Then he said, "All right, this is done. Why don't we get home, Cin? What do you say?"

"You played well," she offered with a clear, confident voice.

And he said, "I guess so," shrugging his shoulders and starting for the door. "I suppose."

Mekal vanished from public view. Sometimes Wallace would keep tabs on the man's computer usage, but it was obvious that he'd had the long-last breakthrough. Now he was busy using code-breaking programs, bringing in consultants from mathematics and physics as well as patent law. There were rumors of big events. Potz reported nocturnal meetings with the highest of the high Company officials, a few select government people in attendance too. There was diffuse noise about a major discovery, Mekal in the middle of things; yet the rumors never did the truth any justice. Sometime in the last thirty thousand years alien beings had come to Earth, seen possibilities, and left behind coded messages inside every living organism. Nobody could invent such craziness over morning coffee. And found by Mekal? That would have strained any credulity that remained.

Eventually came word of a big announcement, a press conference combined with a meeting of key Company people. It would happen Tuesday, then no, Friday. Friday. And it was Thursday afternoon when Mekal came into Wallace's office, closed the door with care, then sat and said, "Listen," and said nothing else. He sat with his hands limp in his lap, his mouth open, his eyes vacant and very nearly exhausted.

"You getting anywhere on that problem I gave you — ?"

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I have."

"Good then."

Mekal licked his lips, then said, "It's your data, of course. I sure intend to give you credit for the data, and you're the person who thought it might be important."

"Is it?"

Mekal blinked and said, "Huh?"

"Important?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, it is." He outlined the bare bones of what he had discovered. It was maybe half of what Wallace had deciphered for himself in

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a single night; but then Mekal added that there was a lot more, now that experts from everywhere were involved. "And you'll get full credit for your part. I want to assure you — "

"Thanks."

Mekal was shaken by Wallace's attitude, by the utter lack of hostility toward him.

"It sounds very, very interesting," said Wallace. "What kinds of things do the aliens say to us?"

"Inside primates, all primates, are star charts. For instance. The messages are set up along taxonomic lines — " just as Wallace had suspected — "and other groups have mathematics and digitized photographs. Beetles are going to contain the bulk of the text. A thousand kinds of technology. It's like...the whole thing...we've got the keys to the universe, you know?"

Wallace nodded, eager to show a smile.

"Oh, and you can sit up with the rest of us tomorrow. Take your bows with the others."

"Thank you, Mekal."

It was killing the man, him listening to the ceaseless good tidings. He almost growled. Then he rose to his feet, wanting to leave.

"A good thing I kept after you, huh?"

Mekal paused, looking back over his shoulder.

"Wasn't it?"

Mekal said, "It was."

"Congratulations."

The tall man didn't have any more words inside him. It was all he could do just to grip the doorknob and turn it, acting as if it might be wired with explosives, opening the door with a smooth slow motion and hesitating, looking up and down the hallway and hesitating, then stepping into the open with one last backward glance, the face allowing itself a grateful smile with the eyes wide. Thunderstruck.

MONTHS PASSED. Wallace didn't again see Cindy until the pigeons arrived, in the spring, the Company organizing a picnic directly below their route. The flock had been released in second-growth timber in the South; their embedded genetics told them where to fly, leading them toward a state park in

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northern Michigan. Naturally the picnic featured pizza and several self-congratulating speeches about the project's successes. Wallace's name was mentioned. Applause rose, then fell, then someone shouted, "Here they come!" and the first wild passenger pigeons in more than a century were passing directly overhead.

It was a strange sight. The birds formed a great disk in the high blue sky. The disk was supposed to resemble an airborne pizza; those behavioral genes had been the toughest puzzles. Wallace pointed and told Cindy, "The clumps are the anchovies," and she laughed quietly, almost without sound.

Mekal couldn't make it. Cindy had explained that he was in Europe again, giving lectures and meeting with some German concerns. The alien messages and technologies had been ruled public property, but the Company had the only extensive records available as yet. The Germans didn't want to be left behind, and afterwards Mekal was flying to Japan —

"Sounds busy," Wallace had said.

"Too busy, I think. But he seems happy." Cindy was wearing jeans and a soft red sweater, and she'd glance at Wallace now and again, on the sly. Sometimes he thought he detected a whiff of loneliness in her voice. Other times, nothing. "I know it's hard to imagine," she had said, "but he's enjoying more success than *he* ever dreamed possible. And that's something, considering Mekkie. But you know that. You're his friend and all." She smiled, her pretty face a little fuller than he remembered. But so pretty, so young, and those eyes reaching straight into him.

"I know Mekkie, all right," he said.

Sometimes Wallace envied Mekal's fame, and that surprised him. He hadn't thought it was in his nature to care about such trivial things. He had to tell himself, "No, it's enough that *you* know who made the discovery. What is, is. The world's assessment doesn't have any relevance at all." And the truth told, Wallace would have hated the celebrity's life. Being carried around like a trophy; acting as the voice of the Company; and the unending crush of reporters and strangers, their motives unknown. It seemed like a picture from Hell. He would be the most famous scientist since Einstein, but Einstein lived before television and marketing, talk shows, and overkill. Posters of Mekal were selling in the millions. He was a public relations dream — a solid, fiery, and manly scientist — and it would only increase if the rumors of a Nobel Prize came true.

No, Wallace was thankful for his anonymity.

Particularly now, he thought, standing with Cindy, close enough to

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smell her perfume and feel her gentle heat.

There were rumors about things other than the Nobel Prize. About Mekal and women, for instance. Every hotel room was filled with flowers sent by admirers. Tabloids linked him with various models and young actresses. Even Potz was supposedly involved, she and Mekal trying out his giant new office one night, the tale coming straight from the janitor who stood in the hallway, leaning against his broom and listening. And of course Cindy had to know at least some of the stories, making Wallace feel sorry for her. Yet he had set up these circumstances, hadn't he? He had guessed what would happen, knowing Mekal. Success can twist and transform people's lives. Fame doesn't corrupt character, but it surely reveals what is already there.

The pigeons were gone, tracking perfectly — a giant flying billboard selling pizzas all the way to a never-seen homeland.

Such a bright day, blue and calm and just a little cool; and Wallace stared across the green countryside for a long moment, smiling to himself, letting himself daydream.

"Well, I'm glad I saw them," said Cindy.

The pigeons.

She hugged herself and said, "Maybe I'll go home now. I can't seem to get warm."

"Maybe I'll leave too."

They started for the parking lot below. For Wallace every step seemed full of possibilities. Mekal gone; his wife alone and lonely. He was aware of her watching him in profile, measuring something; and finally she told him, "You know, he's afraid of you. I don't think Mekkie's slept one good night in months."

"Afraid?"

"Of course he is." She stopped and looked around, making sure they were alone. "You must think he's an idiot, but he's not. You gave him all that evidence, those clues, then you stood by while letting him take the credit — "

"He earned everything," Wallace said with a firm, level voice.

"You hate him, he thinks. You're planning to destroy him." The girl's face was sorrowful, her own sleeplessness showing. "What he thinks is that you've got evidence somewhere. You deciphered the aliens' message first, and when you want, you're going to make him look like a cheat."

"No," he replied. "I'd never do anything like that!"

She said nothing.

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What stunned Wallace were the little jolts of anger directed at him.

"Then what were you planning?" she asked him.

He opened his mouth, then she shut it.

"Because I'm not stupid, Wallace. You might think so — "

"No, no. Not at all!"

" — but you're not fooling me. You knew what you were giving him, I was there, and don't tell me you didn't. Don't."

So this was it. A minute ago he had been daydreaming, he and Cindy making love on her living room floor; and now the daydream felt like a premonition, clear and certain. He reached and grasped one of her hands, squeezing hard. And in broken, quick sentences he outlined the basics of his bold scheme.

What surprised him was her lack of surprise.

Cindy let him hold her cold hand, blue eyes fixed on him; and after a minute she interrupted, telling him, "Stop." She told him, "You're claiming that you've intentionally crippled my marriage, because it didn't satisfy *your* expectations, because *you* thought I'd be happier with someone else," and she pulled back her hand, shutting her eyes and holding them closed.

And Wallace panicked. He had to say something, give her something to deflect her anger. That's why he told about Potz and Mekal, painting it as if he were the person standing outside the office door. He wanted Cindy to see — see *and* admit — that her husband wasn't worthy of her, that she could find a man who would treat her as she deserved —

— and she slapped him with the once-held hand, the *crack* worse than the pain, his head jerking back and her speaking quickly and loudly, assuring him, "I never want to see you again. I don't want you in the same place as me, ever. I just wish you knew how much I hate you, you bastard. You goddamn bastard!"

She turned and walked, then began to run.

And Wallace tried speaking, his mouth ajar and his brain empty. What could he say? Then he was crying, touching his wet face with both hands, feeling certain that he would die of shame any moment. Only he didn't. Couldn't. Thousands of genes inside him, trillions of copies of each, and with their ancient instructions they kept him alive, making him breathe and grieve while people stood at a safe distance, watching and pointing, talking among themselves.

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We end with the story that inspired this month's cover. (The art, by the way, was done by Ron Walotsky, who received a Hugo nomination for his cover on the October/November, 1992 issue.) "Busy Dying" got its title from a Bob Dylan song, "It's All Right Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)."

Brian Stableford is a British science fiction writer, whose most recent publication in the U.K. was a vampire novel, Young Blood, *published by Simon and Schuster. In the United States, Carroll & Graf have just published* The Angel of Pain, *the second volume in a trilogy that includes* The Werewolves of London. *He is currently working on the concluding volume.*

Busy Dying

By Brian Stableford

HE COULDN'T REMEMBER whether he'd ever been to that particular spot before, but the open plaza looked vaguely familiar. As he climbed the ugly centerpiece of the fountain, aiming for the pagoda-like roof above the bug-eyed gargoyles, he seemed to be reaching for familiar footholds. They were already shouting his name, but that didn't mean a thing; he supposed that he'd be recognized in any of a hundred cities, in any of four hundred malls. He was quite a celebrity.

By the time he reached his selected coign of vantage a thousand people were converging on the fountain. The design of the atrium was such that the crowds on the second, third, and fourth floors had as good a view as the people at ground level, and the escalators were crammed with excited gesticulators hoping that the moving stairways wouldn't carry them too far before the show began.

He checked his watch. *Give it ten,* he thought, beginning to count down.

He knew there were a dozen security cameras on him and that anyone

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in the crowd with a camcorder would be pointing it at him already, but the CNI were probably all ready to go with an injunction against any mall in this or any other city, and you couldn't trust amateurs to produce A-1 footage even with today's technological aids. He figured that ten seconds ought to be enough to bring down a few newsdrones. Even the networks posted drones in malls these days, and not just because of him. Malls were the commercial arteries of the nation, and mallnews was always a big item in the human interest slots.

At five he uncapped the can, and threw the cap into the crowd so that the kids could fight over it. At seven he began to pour, so that he would be ready to drop the can into the rippled pool of the fountain at nine.

Smoothly, with practiced competence, he struck the match with his fingernail. *Is that slick, or is that slick*, he asked himself. He had always cared about matters of style.

His sneakers were still squelching and the legs of his pants were soaked from his dash across the pool, but he knew it wouldn't matter. The rest of him was soaked with something infinitely less inclined to dampen the spirits.

The flames came up about him with an audible *whoosh*, and black smoke billowed forth. For a second or two — but it might have been an olfactory illusion — he thought that he could smell his own flesh burning.

Wow, he thought.

Wow! Wow! Wow!

When her bleeper went off Margaret Percik woke up with a sudden start, surprised and slightly guilty about the fact that she'd nodded off.

She didn't need to check her wristphone; it was Emily signaling that Walter Murray was recovering consciousness. She hurried, intent on arriving before he removed the skimskin sealing his eyelids, but she needn't have bothered. The monitoring devices had blown the whistle on him but Walter was playing possum. He hadn't moved a muscle; he was probably playing for time while he tried to figure out who and what and where he was. Thanks to him, doctors now knew that death usually caused temporary amnesia, and he had had enough practice dying to have developed habitual methods of dealing with the condition.

As she checked the instruments she felt sure that he was tracking her movements with avid ears. He flinched, though, when Emily checked his

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waste-disposal tubes. She carefully peeled the skimskin away from his eyes, and he opened them, blinking against the light. He had to close the lids again for a second or two, but when he could keep them open they focused readily enough on her face: no lasting damage there.

He looked up at her without recognition. Emily moved to the head of the bed so that he could study them both. She and Emily were as handsome as one another but not in the least alike, in spite of the fact that they were wearing severely clinical white coats. Margaret was dark and stern and so comprehensively imaged for authority that she was almost austere; Emily was fairer and softer and decorated. Nobody was supposed to be able to tell a woman's age anymore, but that was bullshit. Wrinkles or no wrinkles, Margaret knew, it was obvious to anyone with half an eye that Emily was an absolutely authentic twenty-one, whereas she herself was fifty-five and then some.

Margaret darted a quick glance at Emily, to make sure that she was paying attention. It was important, according to their agreed procedure, that they both looked at him without the slightest trace of sympathy or admiration.

"Can you remember who you are?" Margaret asked.

There was a twenty second gap before he replied. Finally, he said, "I seem to have temporarily misplaced my name. I'm sorry."

"You were very lucky, Mr. Murray," she said. "If you hadn't fallen into the fountain...."

That drew a slight reaction—as if the horror of it had hit him like a punch in the gut, although he couldn't quite fathom out why the thought was so horrible.

"What fountain?" he said, in a puzzled fashion. "Murray, you say? Is that my name — Murray?"

"You shouldn't play with fire, Mr. Murray," said Margaret, as sternly as she could. "It isn't like the knives and the ropes. We can regenerate burned brain-tissue, but not the field-states which inhabited it before it was burned. Try this one again, Mr. Murray, and you might come back first cousin to a cabbage. I guess you already qualify as a zombie ten times over, but this time you were just a few seconds away from being a hundred-forty pounds of fresh meat with vacant possession. As I said, if you hadn't fallen into the fountain...."

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"Do I know you?" he asked.

She did her level best to look at him as though he were some kind of insect crawling around the drawer where she kept her underwear.

"Yes, Mr. Murray," she said sourly. "You know me. And you also know Mr. Stepanova. He's waiting for a call to tell him that you're awake. He has some news for you."

She picked up a remote from the instrument-console beside the bed and punched out a sequence; the wallscreen at the far end of the room flickered blue, displayed the relevant codes, and then dissolved into a picture.

Stepanova had been waiting to make the call; Emily had bleeped him at the same time she'd bleeped Margaret. He was looking straight into the camera, as purposefully as any man could. He'd been chiseled for it, but it wasn't an overly impressive job. Every man of a certain age went in for that kind of power-dressing of the features, and it rather nullified the effect.

"You're busted, Murray," said Stepanova, with a bitter wrath he did not need to feign. "This is the end. We've got an injunction from the Supreme Court banning you from making any further use whatsoever of any product manufactured by the Confederation which is not on open sale. I have a court order requiring you to hand over all the nanotech equipment which you removed from our laboratories. Your lawyers may have built an effective dam against the possibility of your being certified insane and straitjacketed, but this is nice and simple and utterly unbreakable — and to be quite honest, I think your guys are losing heart now that your bank account is in the doldrums. One more suicide and you are under house arrest for ever and ever *a-men*. You're out of it, Murray — understand? It's *over*."

"I'm sure you mean well," said Murray, mildly. "But I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about. Do I know you?"

Stepanova frowned, as if he suspected that he was being ribbed and didn't like it — although Margaret had told him exactly what to expect. She keyed the cut-off on the remote, lest Stepanova should start a pointless argument with her patient. Then she handed over the instrument to Murray. He looked at it for a second or two, but then nodded, as though he were glad to find it perfectly familiar. He handed it back. "*That* I recognize," he said.

"But not me?" she countered.

He shook his head. "I'm Dr. Percik," she said, still straining to be as stern and cold as possible. The theory was that she had to avoid providing any

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comfort that might be construed as approval, and thus as encouragement to repeat the behavior that had brought him to this; apparently it was still standard practice in welcoming attempted suicide victims back from the brink. Personally, she had no faith whatsoever in its efficacy in Walter Murray's case, but she was under some pressure here from her peers and other interested parties, who were far more interested in making him stop than in figuring out why he kept doing it.

"How am I, doctor?" he asked, flatly.

"As well as can be expected," she retorted, bluntly. After a slight pause, during which she nodded an answer to Emily's unspoken question, giving the nurse permission to leave the room, she added: "Stepanova means it, you know. By the time I've collected my fees you'll be as near to flat broke as you can get. The media won't bail you out this time; CNI have them all tied up in red tape. No one wants to talk to you — no one who'll pay you for the privilege, anyhow. Your lawyers aren't even going to try to fight CNI's injunctions. You've finally succeeded in cutting off your nose to spite your face. You may be famous, but you've no job, and if you do anything — I mean *anything* — which involves the use of prototype nanotech you'll be off the net for a long, long time. Have a little patience, Walter, and you may be able to live happily ever after. Kill yourself one more time, and they'll see to it that you die of old age. I have no axe to grind, you understand — I'm out of it too. That's the last face you'll ever get from me. From now on, you get your medicaid on credit. Basic treatment, for which you have to stand in line."

"You have a great bedside manner," he remarked. It was impossible to judge how disoriented he was, and how much he understood of what was being said to him. The idea was to get the message across before he recovered his memory and his resistance.

"It's difficult to be polite to a king-sized pain in the ass," she told him. She narrowed her eyes speculatively, and she said: "If you have got more stolen nanotech squirreled away, you'd better hand it over. However you came by it originally, it's no longer legal for you to have it in your possession. Just tell me where you stashed it, and I'll take it from there."

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I really don't know what you're talking about."

"Everyone's closed ranks, Walter," she said. "We're not going to let you die again. We're not going to let you destroy yourself. This time, you really have to get your head together, okay?"

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He just looked at her, meekly, as if he couldn't understand why she was talking to him that way. She couldn't tell whether, or to what extent, he was putting it on. Perhaps, she thought, it might be best if his memory didn't come oozing back; maybe all he needed was a fresh start. She felt slightly ashamed of the thought which came immediately afterward, which was: *But then we'd never figure out just what the fascination was. Damn Stepanova and his injunctions — there's a mystery here which we ought to be trying to solve.*

She tried to look daggers at him one more time, just for luck, and then stalked out of the room.

WHEN THE bleeper sounded again she woke up without a start, filled with a dull sense that there was no escape. This time it was the automatic signal which told her that Murray had activated the telescreen in his room. She had arranged a tap, in the interests of scrupulous medical care.

The face which was staring out of her own telescreen inevitably seemed to be looking her in the face, although it wasn't. It wasn't even looking Walter Murray in the face: it couldn't, because it was a recording, doubtless programmed to call him in the early hours of the morning, when no one was supposed to be eavesdropping.

"Hello, Walter," said the caller — who wore, of course, Walter's previous face.

"Who the hell are you?" the real Walter replied, his voice slightly distorted by the bug she had placed to catch it.

"I'm your answerphone AI," replied the caller. "Extensively elaborated and reprogrammed by your good self, for exactly such emergencies as this. Don't worry — you just have a slight touch of amnesia. At least, I hope it's slight. It'll probably all come back to you in a day or two, but I'll give you all the help I can. That's what I'm here for. Mostly I'm just a playback device, but I'm rigged for simple questions and answers. Interrupt me whenever you need to. Your name is Walter K Murray; the K doesn't stand for anything longer, it's a one-letter middle name in its own right. You used to work for CNI — that's the Confederation of Nanotechnological Industries — on the Safety Commission. Your official title was Volunteer Subject, but in everyday parlance you were a guinea-pig or a stunt man. You got fired a year

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ago for excessive attention to duty — at least, that's your version. Stepanova cooked up a charge sheet which had everything from petty pilfering to reckless endangerment and bringing the good name of the organization into disrepute, but it was mostly false. Are you with me so far?"

"Not quite," said the real Walter, awkwardly. Margaret wished she could see his face, to judge how he was taking it in, but it hadn't seemed worthwhile to plant a spy-eye in a darkened room. The image on the screen flickered slightly as a new subroutine engaged.

"It's okay," said the AI, gently. "Take your time. I guess you really messed up the old brain cells this time. What did you do?"

"I don't know, exactly," he said. "Something about playing with fire and falling into a fountain. My doctor isn't very helpful." He sounded sincere, but Margaret knew that it might be an act.

"You should watch the news," said the AI. "All you need to do is call up the relevant vidclippings. All your suicides are on tape."

"*All* my suicides? How many are there — and why aren't I dead?"

"You've killed yourself ten times to date," reported the AI, dutifully.

"Why would I do that?" said Walter, who should have known better than to confuse an AI with a new question while one still remained unanswered. Anyway, AIs were a lot better with whats and wheres and whens than they were with whys — all he was going to get was more data, not expert psychoanalysis.

"Your duties as a volunteer subject," said the AI, painstakingly, "involved prototype medical nanotechnologies whose purpose is to enhance the body's powers of self-repair. Their function is to assist in the rebuilding of damaged tissue, to promote the healing of wounds and the regeneration of lost material. To put it simply, your job was to sustain injuries of gradually increasing degrees of seriousness, so as to explore the capacities and the limits of the nanomachines that had been injected into your bloodstream. These included anesthetic enems as well as the repair enems. You were good at your work. You liked it better than most — maybe better than anyone. You were part of an elite group, working with the most advanced prototypes.

"When you first began to exceed your brief the guys in charge were enthusiastic — they encouraged you. The back room boys were quite delighted with you, and probably still are. The company men were avid to go with the flow, and the CNI let them; they didn't see any harm in the media

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attention you got. The first time you came back after being certified dead the euphoria was universal. The CNI brass were as interested as everyone else. It wasn't until the fifth that Stepanova stepped in, talking about turning the CNI into some kind of circus. He was too late, but he's certainly tried to make up for lost time. Do you need more detail on all of this? I've got two more programmed levels, if you do."

"No," said the man in the bed, faintly. "I think it's coming back now, a little. Testing the limits. That's what it was all about. Testing the limits. Exploring the unknown. Boldly to go where no man.... They're trying to stop me, aren't they? They want to stop me."

"Yes they do," answered the AI. "They're trying to stop you, now. But it's okay. You've always been one step ahead of them. Don't worry about a thing. They'll have to send you home in a day or so. Once you're back home, we can sort everything out. Just hang in there, and take it easy. That's all you have to do. Do you want more information?"

There was a long silence before Walter said: "No. Not now. Thanks...I mean...yeah, that's all. Sign off, okay?"

"We'll talk again," promised the AI. "Come home as soon as you can."

The image cut off abruptly.

Margaret pursed her lips as she lay back on the pillow. The AI was right; she had to send Walter Murray home once he was okay physically. Amnesiac or not, he was perfectly lucid. There was no way she could have him put under restraint, as Stepanova had more than once asked her to do, even if she wanted to — and she didn't. That wouldn't be a solution, to Walter's problem or to hers.

She sighed, and lay down in the darkness once again. *What is it about dying,* she asked herself, although the unanswered question had long ago gone stale, *that keeps beckoning him? Why is it that every time he gets his memory back he also recovers all his determination, all his cunning, and all his secretiveness? Just what the hell is going on inside that strangely twisted mind — and what does it augur for the future, when the products he's been testing come marching triumphantly into the marketplace?*

She wondered if similar questions were going through Walter's still-confused mind — and whether he was finding it as difficult to slip away into sleep as she was.

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Margaret let Walter Murray have a whole day to himself before she went to see him again. She didn't monitor him continuously, but the tap she'd placed in his house-system gave her a summary of everything he'd been doing, and it had all been recorded in case she needed to take a closer look. It was nearly nine in the evening when she showed up at the house.

"Well, Walter?" she said, when she'd checked his physical condition. "What do you think of your past life?"

"What do you mean?" he parried, warily.

"I mean that you're obviously still struggling with the amnesia. One hour watching your vidclippings might be nostalgia, two might be narcissism, but six is definitely honest enquiry. You're trying to figure out just what kind of a specimen you are, aren't you? You can tell me — I'm your doctor, remember."

"You didn't seem that interested yesterday."

"That was tactical," she said. "Refusal to pander to attention-seeking lest the behavior pattern gets reinforced. Not that *I* think your behavior is mere attention-seeking, you understand, but there is a school of thought which inclines that way."

"Are you allowed to keep me under observation now I'm at home?" he asked, ducking the issue. "Among the memories of general matters that I haven't lost I seem to recall something about invasion of privacy legislation."

"I'm your doctor, Walter, and you've certainly been ill. Dead and back again, for the tenth time. I'm allowed to monitor you for your own good."

"Are you also allowed to block my phone so that I can't call out? Are you allowed to see to it that I can't even get through the door of my own apartment?" She wondered whether it was a good sign that he was letting out his accumulated resentment so easily.

"Yes I am," she told him. "While you're not fully recovered, I'm entitled to protect you from nuisance."

"Well, I'm fully recovered now. My arms are a little weak and my fingers need practice, but I'm fundamentally sound. You can lift the house arrest. In fact, I insist that you do."

"Tomorrow, Walter — maybe the next day. You have amnesia, remember? It wouldn't be right, professionally speaking, to let you loose without addressing your problem."

"I've addressed it. I'm Walter K Murray, known to the tabloid TV vidveg

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as 'Memento' Murray, though ninety-nine percent of them are too dumb to get the joke. I can recite my entire personal history. No problem. Anyway, I thought you were worried about getting paid. I don't know what you charge per hour, but I'm not sure I can afford house calls."

"You can't afford to be without proper treatment," she told him. "If you want to stop wasting time, why not cut out the hostility and start treating me like the friend I am? I'm your doctor, Walter — I really and truly want you to get well."

She still wasn't speaking softly, but the edge was gone from her voice. She was brisk and frank and she kept eye-contact the whole time. *Trust me,* her eyes were saying. *Confide in me. Just give me a little help, and we can both reach a better understanding.*

When he didn't say anything else, she said: "Did you find out?"

"Find out what?" he countered, warily.

"Why you keep killing yourself. Everyone would like to know — and not just because we want you to stop. We really would like to be able to understand."

"I was rather hoping that *you* could explain that to *me,*" he replied, with just a hint of an implied sneer. "You're the doctor, aren't you?"

"The problem with ready-made psychiatric explanations," said Margaret, undismayed, "is that even those who seek counseling — volunteer subjects, I suppose you might call them — very often resist them. It's always better to guide a patient to the point of view from which he can see for himself what his problem is. Recognition is the first step in recovery."

"Try me anyway," he said.

"Volunteer subjects are screened as carefully as the CNI can," she said, blandly. "They don't want people who have a predilection for injuring themselves, or surgery addicts. They want people for whom it can be an ordinary job — sensible, stable people. Occasionally, though, someone a trifle...exceptional...slips through the net. Someone who likes the work a little too much. In the beginning, no doubt, you represented yourself to yourself as an authentic explorer, impatient with the controls the scientists placed on the experiments. You thought that you were just hungry for knowledge, for understanding. After the first time, though, it very quickly turned into a quest for fame. You'd always resented your own ordinariness, and at last you'd found a way to be extraordinary — a way to make other people take

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notice of you, even to admire you. You crossed the line the first time you came out of the laboratory and into a mall. When you did that, you blew all your excuses out of the window. From then on, it was showmanship. You've kept on killing yourself because you've convinced yourself that it's the only way available to you to make people see you and take notice of you.

"It's not fame *per se* that you want, although you probably told yourself that when you got that agent to try to fix you up with a fat contract with one of the networks. Yours is a pettier kind of exhibitionism than that. It's far from unique, you know — there's a long history of case studies of public self-mutilation. It's just that nowadays, when medical nanotech can fix almost any superficial injury up to and including self-castration, it's far more difficult to seem to be flirting with death. You're the man who proved that you actually have to go there and back to make a public impact. Fortunately, that impact is on the wane. The religious fraternity and the parapsych fringe lost interest when you couldn't bring back any hard information about the other side, and you must have noticed that the news coverage is getting briefer and more sarcastically dismissive. They're just keeping count now, Walter. The whole business has gone stale, and you can't enliven it just by playing with fire."

It all sounds good, she thought, when she'd finished, *but is it true? Come on, Walter — just give me a clue.*

"You can't tell me I'm insignificant," he said, defensively. "What about that organization out in California — the Thanaticists. They seem to be building quite a little pressure group. LICENSE RESURRECTION NOW. WE DEMAND UNIVERSAL ACCESS TO RECREATIONAL DEATH. GOD BLESS SAINT WALTER THE MARTYR. Some banners."

"They're clowns, Walter. You know what California's like — you still have your general memories, don't you?"

"You're trying to trivialize it," he said, suspiciously. "This is tactical, just like the other stuff. You're trying to belittle what I've done — but I'm not just a trafficker in slit wrists and overdoses, am I? I'm not *playing* with death. I've been *all the way,* again and again and again. And whatever the religious people say, I *have* brought back news. They just want to discount it because it isn't the news they wanted. I don't remember it just now, but I trust myself enough to believe what I told all those newsmen." He didn't sound *entirely* certain.

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"I believe that too," Margaret assured him. "There's no Heaven, no miraculous light, no choirs of angels, no judgment. There's *nothing*. Death is death; when the light of consciousness goes out, the darkness is absolute. Death is a void — a black hole. We always knew that; we didn't need you to tell us. So why on earth do you keep going back? What's the attraction?"

He was confused; she felt sure of it. He was in a peculiar state of mind, wishing to defend himself but not quite knowing how. So far, most of what he knew about his exploits was information that he'd picked up from the vidclippings. There was a possibility that he was amenable to argument, vulnerable to persuasion — maybe more so than he'd ever been before.

"You say we always knew it," he countered, uneasily. "But is that really true? Maybe we did always know, deep down — but how many of us dared to believe it? How many of us dared to confront that knowledge, while we still had feeble hopes to cling to? Did you see me on that talk show with the cardinal and the imam? *They* didn't know it — but didn't I show them? Didn't I put a spoke in their wheel?"

"They weren't impressed, Walter," she told him, calmly. "You must have seen that. They have a dozen ways around your supposed proof, and they aren't in the least inconvenienced by your claims. They can always reason along the lines that you're just an infidel anyway, or that God knew that you were coming back here and had no reason to roll out the red carpet and give you a glimpse of Heaven. Then again, some people's idea of Hell is eternal darkness, and if ever there was a man bound for Hell, it's surely you. Suicide is a sin, Walter, and you're the most successful recidivist suicide in the history of the world. Maybe you missed your best chance, Walter. You could have made up a story — a new vision. You could have founded your own little cult based in your own revelation. It wouldn't have attracted quite as many members as the Thanaticists, but you could probably have managed a dozen disciples."

He pursed his lips in frustration. "I'll remember, you know," he said. "It'll come back to me."

Margaret sighed. "You may be right," she said. "But it might be better for you if you were wrong. You might be saner at this particular moment in time than you've been for much of the last three years. Let me warn you again, Walter — you really have reached the limit of everyone's tolerance. I want you to get well, and even Mr. Stepanova would like nothing better than to see you restored to sense and sanity. You could still do a lot of good by repenting,

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and maybe get more media attention out of that than you could possibly get out of one more fountain-climb in one more randomly chosen mall. Think about it, Walter — and if you happen to remember where you stashed the rest of that stuff you ripped off from the labs, turn it in. Please."

He shrugged his shoulders, but she had no way of knowing what he really felt. "Sorry," he said, dully. "I guess I'm a little off-balance. Thanks, Doctor — it really does help."

"I hope so," she said. "I'll unfreeze your door and your phone tomorrow, okay? But take it slowly. Whatever does or doesn't come back, take your time about everything. There really is all the time in the world; according to the CNI, we're on the threshold of immortality. It's yours and mine for the taking, if only we can wait a few more years. This is no time to be trying to kill yourself. Next time, you might not be able to get back."

He thanked her again — but when she got back to the hospital the tap revealed that he'd gone straight back to the AI, plumbing its depths for the most intimate subroutines he'd planted during his previous incarnations.

"YOU HAVE to look at it this way," said the image of Walter's last face but one, delivering a pre-recorded speech which wasn't jigged for interruption. "What we call 'life' is really death. I mean, we begin to die before we're even born. The single cell from which we grow begins to age before it begins to divide, and it's dying all the time while it's growing, changing, developing. Birth isn't the beginning — in terms of the total numbers of cell-divisions which are needed to make us what we finally become, nine-tenths of our lives are spent in the womb. An adult is just a baby grown large, a corpse waiting to keel over. Death isn't what people think it is, and insofar as it's a sham it has to be *revealed* as a sham — or what the hell is intellectual progress all about?"

Pompous idiot, thought Margaret, as she played back what the tape had recorded.

"The true significance of what you and I have accomplished, Walter," the AI went on, "is to demonstrate how arbitrary that line is which doctors have drawn between life and death. It was always a myth. The body doesn't die all at once, nor does the brain. All kinds of functions carry on after the stopping of the heart, the scrambling of the brain-waves. We can come back

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from what used to be thought of as 'beyond' — but all that proves is that it wasn't really beyond at all. And what we come back to isn't life...it's just a different phase of our long, desperate dying.

"What you and I are all about is challenging people's taken-for-granted ideas. The point of it all is to break down the categories of their habitual patterns of thought, to free them from their simplistic either/or calculus of life and death, being and nothingness. That's why we have to keep going, in spite of all they're determined to do to make us stop."

Us, thought Margaret, wondering how significant the choice of pronoun might be. *What kind of man leaves messages for himself which talk about* us? *Is this really for real, or is it just some kind of joke, planted for my benefit, to make fun of* me?

On the other hand, she wondered, might *us* be entirely appropriate? Could the new Walter feel any real mental kinship with the answerphone AI or the earlier incarnation of himself who had programmed it so carefully to relay this rubbish? Maybe it seemed as weird and way out to him as it was to her.

She was interrupted in her monitoring by a call from Stepanova.

"You let him out," he said, accusingly.

"I had to," she told him, slightly awkwardly. "I'm a doctor; my responsibility is to my patient. I can't infringe his civil rights."

"Never mind his civil rights," he said. "You're his doctor — you're supposed to stop the stupid idiot killing himself again. Did you find the stuff? Will he hand it over?"

"I recommended to Mr. Murray that if he had any more CNI materials he should hand them over to me or to you," she said, patiently. "I don't have any authority to search his apartment."

"Nor do I, in theory," said Stepanova, "but I can assure you that the stuff isn't there, unless he's found some hidey-hole that even the best searchers can't locate."

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Mr. Stepanova," Margaret said, wearily. Stepanova, she decided, was an even bigger pain in the ass than Murray himself. At least Murray was *interesting.* Stepanova was just gross.

"Don't be so fucking precious," said the CNI man. "Did you explain to him that next time there'll be no way back — that he can't afford to pay you, and that his medical insurance is worthless? Did you tell him that he'd just

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be allowed to die?"

"No I didn't, Mr. Stepanova," she said. "I'm not in the business of making crude threats. I want to help him overcome his problem just as much as you do, but I don't think blackmail and bullying would really count as a solution, even if they worked."

"Bullshit," said Stepanova. "Whatever works *works*, and that's all a solution is. If you don't tell him, I will. One more public performance and he is *dead*. Really dead, forever and ever. I will personally see to it. It's over. He has to understand that. And he has to give the stuff back; that's not up for negotiation."

"At present, he doesn't seem to understand anything very well," said Margaret. "I don't think he knows where the enems are hidden. It might well be best if he stayed that way. If you start pressuring him, you'll probably make things worse. Threats might only serve to rebuild and reinforce his motivation."

"You don't have the first idea what his motivation is," said Stepanova scornfully, the insult hurting her all the more by virtue of its truth. "You haven't even got close — and now *your* time is running out along with his. Personally, I don't care what his motives are; I just want to provide him with a bigger and better motive for staying out of view. We have our own ad campaigns for the new-generation enems all planned, and they don't involve malls, fountains, or human torches. We don't need rumors to the effect that enems which are actually a great boon to medical science have mentally unbalancing side effects. We *certainly* don't need the kind of delays we'd get if some boneheaded congressman from the backwoods manages to push through a demand for an investigation by congressional committee. I need to be able to tell my people in Washington that it's all over, and I want you to do everything you can to make certain that they won't be disappointed. So tell him to hand over the stuff."

She didn't like the implied threat. "Walter Murray is my patient," she said, flatly. "My only responsibility is to him."

"Your responsibility," said Stepanova, grimly, "is to make sure that he stays healthy. That's all I'm asking you to do. Just make certain that it's *over*. It's as simple as that."

But it isn't as simple as that, she thought, when she'd signed off. *It really isn't.*

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Once she'd unblocked Walter Murray's systems and set him at liberty the information relayed by her taps became markedly less informative. The AI answerphone had to return to such routine tasks as clocking up various items of junk mail and messages expressing support and solidarity, plus numerous offers of ready cash for any bootleg enems Walter might still have access to. Walter also took delivery of two imaginatively couched death-threats and file copies of seven different injunctions taken out by CNI against him and miscellaneous others, and made a few calls himself — none of them in reply to those he had received. He registered available for employment, checked the state of his asset accounts and his uncollected liabilities, and then filed for bankruptcy.

Margaret could only wonder whether he'd remembered where he'd stashed his illicitly acquired enems — and whether he might be tempted by the black market prices they might command. If he were prepared to sell them — or even to try to sell them — that would presumably mark an end to his great adventure.

But he didn't try to sell them. And in spite of Stepanova's continued demands he didn't give them back to their rightful owners. He spent the second and third days of his freedom being intensively interrogated by the police about the stolen enems, without benefit of counsel — as Stepanova had gleefully prophesied, his lawyers were no longer very interested in him now that he was no longer solvent — but he just kept insisting that he didn't know where they were, or even whether they existed.

It wasn't until the fourth day that he went outdoors for the first time, but once he got back into the habit it became more difficult for her to track his progress. She didn't doubt that he would be followed everywhere by Stepanova's agents, but she couldn't bring herself to ask Stepanova where he went and what he did.

If Walter's memory was coming back he was careful not to show the slightest sign of it. Not that such signs would have been easily evident; after all, he knew enough about himself by courtesy of secondary sources to be able to function efficiently in a world whose general features he had never forgotten. He seemed to be making a fresh start — but he had seemed to do that before, and it had all been illusion.

After a full week had gone by, though, Walter called Stepanova and asked

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how he might make amends for his former derelictions of duty. He volunteered to do anything that Stepanova wanted him to do by way of formal public recantation — and when Stepanova proved more than willing to take him up on the offer he followed through, and spent the next two days confessing his sins to a series of press conferences. He'd never done *that* before — but he'd never been bankrupt before, either.

Ironically, it transpired — as Margaret had suggested — that there was money in repentance. He was able to sell a few network interviews, and became solvent again. He began hunting through his files and interrogating his answerphone AI, as if trying to find out whether he really did have any enems still tucked away, and — if so — where they might be. Given that he must have known that he was under surveillance by several different agencies, Margaret wasn't surprised that the answerphone AI couldn't or wouldn't impart this information.

She didn't see him again until it was time for a routine checkup, and she had little alternative but to play along with him, whether it was all deceit or not.

"Have you remembered why you did it?" she asked him, conversationally, when she'd checked that he was fully fit in a physical sense.

"I can remember setting myself on fire," he told her. "But it's hazy — as if I were just an observer, watching it happening to someone else. I can only remember the *outside* of the event, not the *inside.* I can't remember what I *felt.*"

"Pity," she said. "You can't be sure, then, that your public promise to be a reformed character will stick?"

"I don't see why not," he said. "I'm perfectly sincere. Even if I do remember the reason, I can still keep the promise. I've listened carefully to all my old interviews — I know how ridiculous much of what I said then really is. I wonder, doctor, whether I might actually have cured myself with the fire — whether I might have burned away the sickness which was making me do it. Maybe that's what I was subconsciously trying to do all along. Is that possible, do you think?"

What she thought was *bullshit!* but she had no intention of letting him know that.

"We can always hope," she said.

"What do *you* think made me do it, doctor?" he said, appealing to her

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with wide and innocent eyes. "Was I somehow *addicted*, do you think? Or was there something about the act of self-murder, the sensation of dying, which gave me a perverse thrill?"

"I don't know," she said. "If you knew before, you were careful to keep it a deep, dark secret."

"Not this time," he assured her. "If I remember, I'll tell you everything. Everything I can."

"What about Stepanova's enems?" she asked. "Will you give those back, if and when you remember where they are?"

He seemed genuinely perplexed. "Mr. Stepanova keeps on at me about them," he admitted. "He's really rather angry about them — and I'm not sure that he believes me when I tell him that I really have no idea where they might be."

Margaret wished that she knew whether or not to believe him, annoyed with herself for her inability to be sure. *Oh, Walter,* she thought. *What on earth did I do to deserve you?*

Later, at the hospital, Emily asked how Walter was getting along. Margaret gave her a full and frank account of the state of play, not knowing or caring whether it would get back to Stepanova.

"Do you believe him?" Emily asked, as she was bound to do.

"I want to," said Margaret, honestly. "If he *is* a different man, I can't claim any credit for it — but if he isn't, I dare say that some of the blame will attach itself to me. I just have to hope that he'll be okay this time — and that one day, he and I will be in a position to work out what the hell it was all about."

"You might be able to have him put under permanent restraint," she said. "For his own good, of course. That way, you'd avoid the possibility that he's just stringing you along."

"This isn't the twentieth century," Margaret pointed out. "Arguing the case in court would probably do more damage to my image and career than another suicide — there's a sense in which I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't, unless he really is done with it."

"Do you think we'll *ever* know why he did it?" said Emily, wonderingly.

"According to his answerphone," said Margaret, "We're all busy dying — he's just been a little bit busier than most. Last time, though, there was

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another subroutine which went on and on about death being the one great mystery, the primal source of existential *angst*. If only he could be consistent.... Perhaps it was like climbing Everest; perhaps he did it simply because he could — and now that Stepanova's made it clear to him that he can't, he'll stop."

Her beeper sounded then, to remind her that she had other patients to see, and she had to run. Not everyone had state-of-the-art enems to defend them against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and even if Stepanova managed to avoid the congressional inquisition he was so anxious about, the vast majority of people would never be able to afford them.

As things turned out, she was busy in the theater for the next six hours, and it wasn't until she came out that they gave her the news.

Walter Murray was dead: truly, finally, irrevocably dead. They were calling it an accident. There was no proof — and she had no doubt that none would turn up — that it was anything else.

She got to him as soon as she could, but it really was too late. There was absolutely nothing she could do, except for a *post mortem*.

She called Stepanova immediately afterward, knowing full well that she had to keep her tongue under a very strict guard.

"It's a tragedy," she said. "If only he really had had some of the stuff still hidden away, maybe he could have walked away."

"He'd have had to remember where it was first," said Stepanova, dryly. "Anyhow, if he'd handed it over, his conscience might have been clear enough to stop him stepping out in front of the autotruck." That, she knew, was the nearest he was going to get to an admission that it might not have been an accident at all. Needless to say, it hadn't been a CNI autotruck; that would have been too cruel a coincidence.

"His memory was coming back," she pointed out. "He might have remembered at any time. He might still have turned it over, the way he promised he would."

"Pigs might fly," said Stepanova. "My guess is that he knew where it was all along. He would have gone for it when he thought he'd lulled us all into a false sense of security. All that recantation crap was just a ploy. It was only a matter of time before he turned up dead again — dead for good."

Margaret couldn't help remembering how eager CNI had been to play along with Murray in the early days, when it had all seemed like good

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publicity for their technomiracles. They had encouraged him then, and given him all the motivational reinforcement he had needed. All it had taken to change their minds, though, was a change in the direction of the corporate-political wind. Once Stepanova had been brought in, there had been no real question of waiting to see, or hoping that things would ultimately sort themselves out. Men like Stepanova had no compunction about going all the way, just as soon as they felt that the moment was right.

"We'll never know, now," she said, hopelessly. "We'll *never* understand exactly what happened, why he did it."

"To tell you the truth, doctor," said Stepanova, "I don't give a damn why he did it. That's your business, not mine. My job is to protect the corporate image of CNI, and I don't mind telling you that I can't raise a tear at the thought that Walter K Murray is getting his last little flurry of publicity. After all, he's got what he always wanted, hasn't he? He'll never have to do it again."

"No," she said, wondering why she felt so sick, given that she'd learned nothing from the call that she hadn't already known.

As soon as she'd signed off she went directly to Walter's apartment. She still had a means of access, and once she was inside she still had the means to seal all the systems and block any traffic. When she'd done that, she carefully winkled out the taps that had been planted there, knowing that their removal wouldn't trigger any alarms. Then she summoned the answerphone

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AI.

"Walter K Murray is dead," she said. "He was comprehensively mangled by an autotruck. A check showed nothing wrong with its programming, so it's assumed that the fault was his — simple carelessness in observing the rules of the road. In all probability, he was murdered."

"This is very bad news," said the answerphone, neutrally. Mourning was way beyond the limits of its programming. It had no imagination to fill it with fear of its own eventual redundancy; no capacity to shed tears or empathize with its maker's fate; no *real* sense of the great mystery of death.

"It was bound to end this way, sooner or later," she said, as though she were talking to Walter himself instead of to his simulacrum. "Everybody has to die, and Walter sailed closer to the wind than most. But this isn't the way he would have chosen. If his past really was behind him, it's a cruel fate; if it wasn't, he'd far rather have gone out in a very different style."

"True," said the answerphone, which may or may not have understood what she was saying. How cleverly had Walter programmed it to meet the needs of his future selves?

"We'll never know, now, what it was all about," she said. "No one will ever know why he did it. It's a pity."

"It's a pity," echoed the AI, agreeably.

She didn't smile. "And no one will ever know where he hid the remaining enems, if there were any left," she said, and then added: "Unless,

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of course, you have deeply hidden subroutines which the taps could never reach."

"Of course," said the AI, once again echoing her thought, as AIs were ever wont to do.

She couldn't remember whether she'd ever been to this particular mall before, but the open plaza looked familiar. As she climbed the ugly centerpiece of the fountain people began shouting at her, but it was surprise rather than recognition. Nobody knew her; she wasn't a celebrity; she wasn't Walter K Murray.

By the time she reached her selected coign of vantage, though, a couple of hundred people were converging on the fountain. The design of the atrium was such that the crowds on the second, third, and fourth floors had as good a view as the people at ground level, and the escalators were crammed.

She checked her watch, and took her courage in both hands. *Give it ten,* she thought, beginning to count down. There was a certain propriety to be maintained. There were bound to be newsdrones on duty; malls were the commercial arteries of the nation, and mallnews was always a big item in the human interest slots.

She grinned faintly at the thought of Stepanova's probable reaction to the newsvids. *It's all your own fault,* she thought. *If you hadn't made certain that this was the only way I could ever find out....*

At five she uncapped the can, and threw the cap into the crowd. At seven she began to pour. At nine she dropped the can into the rippled pool. She struck the match awkwardly on the side of the box. Her pants and sneakers were cold and damp upon her legs and feet, but she knew it wouldn't matter. The rest of her was soaked with something infinitely less inclined to dampen the spirits.

Someone in the crowd was waving a Thanaticist banner, which had materialized as if by magic. SAINT WALTER THE MARTYR, it said. *Saint Margaret the Martyr,* she thought, and raised a burning hand in salute.

The flames came up about her with an audible *whoosh,* and black smoke billowed forth. For a second or two — but it might have been an olfactory illusion — she thought that she could smell her own flesh burning.

Wow, she thought.

Just for a single fleeting moment, she felt she understood everything —

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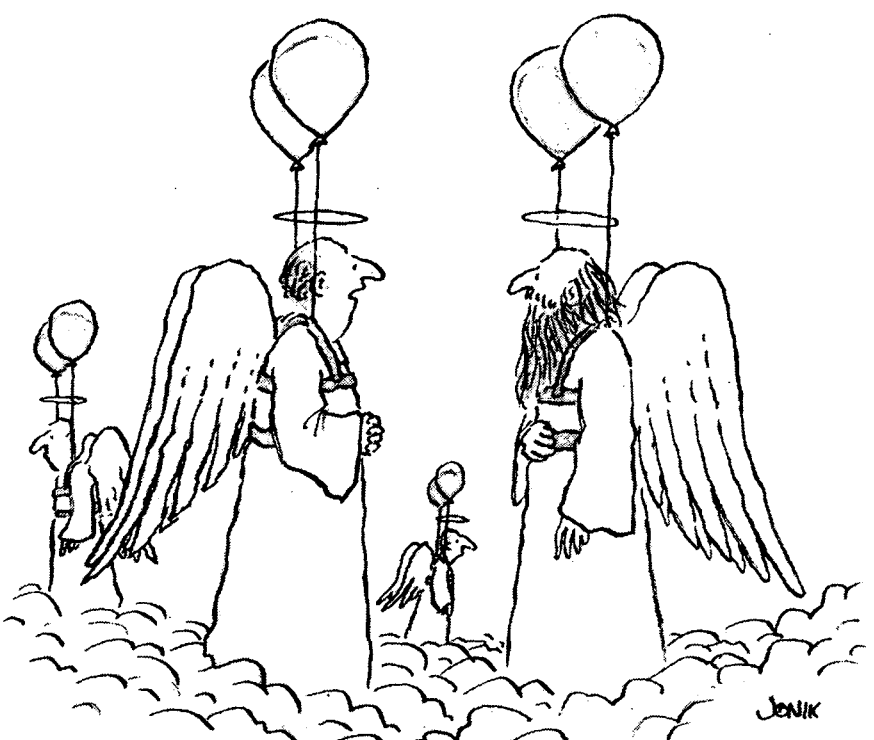
literally *everything.*

So dear old Sigmund was right, she thought, wonderingly. *It's in us all, repress it as we may — and all it needs is answering, to show us its ultimate reward. What a world you're making, Mr. Stepanova: eternal life and eternal death for everyone.... what a wonderful, wonderful world!*

The thought required little more than an instant, and that was all she had to enjoy the magical sensation. Hardly had the connection been made before she was left with nothing but the unbelievable agony of *being ablaze* — and the hope that when she woke up, afterwards, she might be able to recover the infinitely precious memory of the deathwish fulfilled.

It was nothing but hope, but it was something to cling to, something to carry her through.

Wow! she thought, again, before thought itself was finally eclipsed, *Wow! Wow! Wow!*



"I hope you won't think I'm looking a gift horse in the mouth, but, could I ask a question?"

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE HAVE SOME treats in store in our March issue. After much too long an absence, **James Morrow** returns to our pages with a wonderful bit of fiction that didn't fit into his current novel, *Towing Jehovah*. The piece, "Director's Cut," is a stand-alone one act play about an interview with Moses. The play covers everything from the Tablets of the Law to Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* as only James Morrow can do.

Also in March, acclaimed writer **Dave Smeds** makes his first appearance in *F&SF*. Dave, whose work has been called "stylistically innovative, symbolically daring examples of craftsmanship at the highest level" by the *New York Times Book Review*, comes to us with the first of two short stories. This one, "A Marathon Runner in the Human Race," is about Neil Corbin, one of the last elderly people in the country to undergo nanosurgery to become young again.

Finally, **Carolyn Ives Gilman** returns with a wonderful cover story, "The Wild Ships of Fairny." The story is set in the same world as her fantasy novel, *Haven*, a world in which ships are creatures which live and must be captured before humans can put them to use. This is a beautiful, lyrical piece about a hunt for the wild ships, which have become scarce and cautious.

Let's time travel a bit into the future and see what awaits: We have cover stories by **Ian MacLeod**, **Elizabeth Hand**, **Robert Reed**, **Marcos Donnelly**, and **R. Garcia y Robertson**. We just purchased an absolutely stunning sf novella by **Mike Resnick**, as well as a collaboration between Mike and Campbell Award nominee **Nicholas A. DiChario**. Also upcoming, a powerful novella by **Nina Kiriki Hoffman**, and short stories by **Dave Bischoff**, **Rob Chilson**, and our own **Gregory Benford**. So be sure to keep your subscription current.

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A LITTLE NGINEERING ERE, A LITTLE NGINEERING HERE, AND WHAT DO YOU GET?

DR. QUARK

HOW ARE THE TOMATOES?

THEY'RE ORANGES.

YOU'RE COLOR BLIND, BUT I'LL TAKE A POUND.

THESE CARROTS YOU SOLD ME TASTE LIKE ONIONS.

THAT'S BECAUSE THEY **ARE** ONIONS.

HEY, MAC-I WAS SAMPLING YOUR GRAPES. THEY TASTE LIKE LEMONS.

WOOF, WOOF!

SAMPLING THEM! HOW MUCH DO YOU OWE ME?

ARE YOU KIDDING! **YOU OWE ME!** THE EXPERIENCE UPSET MY PSYCHOLOGICAL EQUILIBRIUM. I'LL BE SCARRED FOR LIFE.

DR. Q'S TRANSGENIC FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

QUARK! WHAT'S GOING ON HERE? **YOU**—IN RETAILING?

IT'S MORE OF AN EXPERIMENT. I MOVED SOME GENES AROUND, AND THOUGHT I COULD MAKE A BUCK WITH IT.

WHAT ABOUT THE RUMOR THAT YOU'RE OPENING A TRANSGENIC PET SHOP.

IDLE TALK, I ASSURE YOU.

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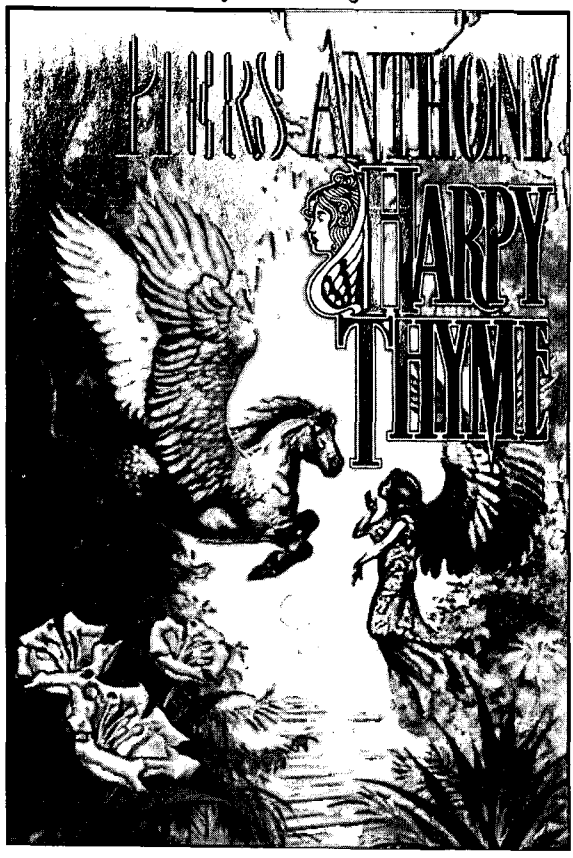

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